Union of Doom

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Set after Harry's 7th year, omits HPB and DH. Harry and Severus are forced to marry each other in order to defy Voldemort. Times become even darker for the two wizards...but is there still hope in spite of all? Completed!

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Chapter 1

CHAPTER 1

A/N: Dear all, I'm back with my third Snarry fic which follows a Harry-and-Severus-are-forced-to-marry-each-other plotline. Does not include the two last Harry Potter books though it borrows a few elements from them. I will not be able to update this story as often as I did with the other two – perhaps twice a week. I hope you will enjoy it :-)

The characters and universe in this story do not belong to me; they belong to J.K. Rowling.

Plot summary:

Harry has just finished his seventh year. Voldemort is unfortunately still around, and Severus is called regularly for Death Eater meetings. After reading an article about the "Wizarding World's Most Eligible Bachelor", Voldemort toys with the sinister idea of Severus marrying Harry but mournfully points out that this would be impossible because of Dumbledore. Severus, who is on Dumbledore's side, tells the Headmaster about Voldemort's thoughts. To his horror, Dumbledore thinks that it is a perfect idea. A tense ceremony with a seething Severus and an equally seething Harry takes place. Voldemort, who is delighted at the turn of events, tells Severus that he has one year to torture and abuse Harry in nearly every way he wishes and to prevent Dumbledore from finding out. Simultaneously, he is to find a way for the Death Eaters and Voldemort to invade Hogwarts. After a mutually traumatic consummation of their marriage, things look very dark for both Severus and Harry…Until, against all hope and reason, they realise that they have only each other…

Voldemort's thin fingers scuffed the pages of the *Daily Prophet* lazily as he perused the article on the front page. It bore the following title:

HARRY POTTER – THE WIZARDING WORLD'S MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELOR GRADUATES.

Voldemort read it out slowly in his high cold voice and followed it up with a derisive sound. He was surrounded by the Death Eaters, all of them masked, cloaked and hooded. Peter Pettigrew was hunched subserviently; Bellatrix Lestrange's stance was proud and arrogant. Severus Snape, standing between Bellatrix and Lucius Malfoy, followed Voldemort's movements closely, black eyes impassive behind his mask.

"Harry Potter has lived to graduate. How disappointing," Voldemort remarked, turning the page to finish the article. After a few minutes of silence, he folded the newspaper and stared at the Death Eaters with his snake-like red eyes.

"Potter enjoys the charms of his own gender… How fascinating. Is it true, Severus? You taught him – I am sure you kept an eye on his activities outside the classroom?"

Small coughs and suppressed laughs could be heard.

"His romantic persuasions were never of any particular interest to me, my Lord," Severus said disinterestedly, "but he seems to appreciate the joys of being unattached."

"It is such a shame, Severus, that you cannot be the one to change his single status."

"I beg your pardon, my Lord?"

"I believe you share his…preferences, Severus."

Snickers echoed around the room in Malfoy Manor.

"Isn't that so, my dear Peter Pettigrew?" Voldemort drawled.

The smallest among the Death Eaters affirmed the question hastily, bowing and bobbing ludicrously as he did so.

"Yes, yes, Peter here once mentioned your lamentable affliction to me, my faithful Severus. I believe it made you very…popular when you studied at Hogwarts. Still, your predicament gave me a few ideas. When I was reading that article, I could not help dreaming a little dream. A dream which would bring about the end of Harry Potter for once and for all. I dreamt that you, Severus, and he were married."

He was interrupted by laughter from several amused throats.

"I think I may choose this time to fine-tune the Cruciatus curse," Voldemort said softy, playing with his wand. Silence fell, and the shapes of the Death Eaters became stiff.

"Just imagine if you and he were married, Severus. You would have your way with him. You could make him your toy, your plaything. Humiliate him. Weaken him and find a way to bring him away from Hogwarts and into my presence. He would be mine to finish off…Or, if he were brainwashed enough, agree to join my ranks. Killing him would be too merciful of me, now that I think of it. Ah well, it is only a dream. I will have to resort to less speculative avenues. You have told me that he is continuing to stay at Hogwarts in the hopes of training to become the Defense Against The Dark Arts teacher, Severus?"

"Indeed, my Lord. For a year. Alastor Moody has agreed to take over the post for one last year."

"A year," Voldemort hissed. "A year is too much. I want the boy within a year, at the most, and not by the end of it. And you, Severus, will have to find a way without attracting attention."

"I shall see what can be done, my Lord," Severus murmured.

"You had better, Severus," Voldemort said, pointing his wand at the tall thin wizard.

" *Crucio* !"

Severus fell onto the ground, knife-like pain tearing through his limbs. Voldemort yawned and lifted the curse after a few moments.

Severus rose to his feet slowly, one hand clutching at his side.

"A tiny reminder, my dear Severus," Voldemort said. Bellatrix chortled softly.

A little later, Severus was sitting in Dumbledore's office, telling the Hogwarts Headmaster about Voldemort's appalling fantasies concerning the article in *The Daily Prophet* . Dumbledore listened quietly, hands neatly folded on the polished desk before him. When Severus had finished, Dumbledore looked into his black eyes thoughtfully.

"You know, Severus, Voldemort sometimes has the knack of witlessly offering us a something like a solution."

"What are you implying, Albus?" Severus asked cautiously. His face was very pale after the Cruciatus curse.

"Why, Severus, I think a marital union between you and Harry would be an excellent idea."

Severus stared at him as if he was seeing him for the very first time.

"You think that it would be…an excellent idea?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes, my dear boy. You are one of the most talented and skilled wizards I know, Severus, and therefore one of the most powerful. If you marry Harry-"

"I SHALL NEVER MARRY HARRY POTTER!" Severus roared, bringing his fist upon Dumbledore's desk with a sickening crash. The

portraits in Dumbledore's office gasped collectively, with the exception of Phineas Nigellus Black, who was slyly following the conversation.

"Severus, do calm down and hear me out, please. Marriage would be far more efficient to protect Harry-"

"And I thought Gryffindors loved romance," Severus commented acidly.

Dumbledore continued:

"-and you must not forget that the Ministry is corrupt and will try its best to harm Harry in its own way."

"Why marriage?" Severus asked disgustedly.

"Bind Harry to you, Severus, and Harry will be bound to Hogwarts and its protections. In the meantime, Voldemort will think that I arranged your marriage so that you can protect Harry. But actually, you will betray me behind my back and have your way with Harry, torturing and brainwashing him into complete submission. And then, Voldemort will do something worse than kill him: he will make Harry do his bidding and wield him as a swordsman wields a good sword."

"And why me? Why don't you marry him, if you are so concerned for his well-being?" Severus asked contemptuously.

Dumbledore began to laugh.

"You are very flattering, Severus. Voldemort did show a penchant for you as a potential spouse. And it will be so practical, too. I thought it would be an excellent idea if you, besides Alastor Moody, instructed him for his Defense Against The Dark Arts training program. I will call Dobby and ask him to fetch Harry Potter now."

"He will never consent, just as I shall never consent! I cannot believe you are drawing inspiration from the Dark Lord's ravings! Or that I

am still supposed to teach that brat!" Severus snarled furiously.

"We shall see, Severus."

"The Headmaster wants to see Harry Potter! The password is Kiwi Popsicle," Dobby squeaked breathlessly, his tea cosy at a rakish angle. Harry Potter jumped up from his four-poster bed. The dormitory was empty. The other students had gone home; he was remaining behind to discuss further steps against Voldemort with Dumbledore, and to start his training as soon as possible.

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry said. The seventeen-year-old wizard had grown but was not very tall. His build was slight, his hair as messy as ever and his eyes were their characteristic emerald green colour. The house-elf disappeared and Harry left Gryffindor Tower, was admitted to Dumbledore's office and stopped at the threshold when he saw Severus Snape sitting opposite Dumbledore.

"Ah, Harry," Dumbledore said cheerfully, "please sit down."

Harry sat down with an ominous feeling. His chair was next to Severus's, and the Potions Master threw him a look of deepest loathing.

"Harry, I have come to the conclusion that you and Severus should marry."

Harry stared at Dumbledore. Then he began to laugh.

"Okay, I know we don't get on well, but may I know why I am here?"

Severus snorted.

Dumbledore's face remained perfectly cheerful.

"I am serious, my boy," he told Harry and briefly summarised what Severus had learnt during the Death Eaters' meeting.

"THERE IS NO WAY I AM EVER GOING TO MARRY SNAPE!" Harry bellowed, as pale as Severus.

" *Professor* Snape, Harry, though you may want to address him more familiarly once you are married," Dumbledore corrected him.

"There is no way you can force me to marry him," Harry spat, standing up with clenched fists.

"I told you so, Albus," Severus drawled.

"I really must insist," Dumbledore said, his humour and mildness gone from his voice.

"NO!" both wizards shouted back.

"You can divorce each other after the world has been rid of Voldemort," Dumbledore said crisply.

"I have never heard of such a ridiculous thing before," Snape sneered, "marrying in order to defy both Voldemort and the Ministry-"

"Severus, it is simply what is called a convenient marriage. And, if I am not mistaken, you both prefer men."

"You mean, a most inconvenient marriage," Harry observed sarcastically.

"With most unsuitable, ah, suitors," Snape threw in.

There was a very uncomfortable silence in the room.

"I was also thinking of a bonding ceremony," Dumbledore added, sounding vaguely apologetic.

"WHAT!" Snape yelled, upsetting his chair. Harry, who had no idea what a bonding ceremony was, looked confused.

Chapter 2

CHAPTER 2

A/N: Wow! Thanks a lot for reading and reviewing the first chapter in such great numbers, it's wonderful to be back with this story and to see that you're back as well!

"I may prefer men, Headmaster, but Potter is someone I definitely do not prefer, least of all to *bond* with!" Severus whispered, glaring at Dumbledore.

"But isn't bonding synonymous with marrying? Aren't they more or less the same thing?" Harry asked.

Severus threw him a scornful glance.

"Nor do I prefer espousing ignoramuses," he remarked glacially.

"Please calm yourselves and resume your seats," Dumbledore said quietly. Both wizards obeyed without delay.

"Bonding, Harry, is a wizarding ceremony which is often regarded as even stronger than marriage. It is separate from the marriage ceremony and gives you blood protection. Blood is taken from both participants, poured and mixed into a vial and sealed magically. A contract is signed by both parties, the bonder and a witness. Your blood protection expired when you turned seventeen, Harry. If you bond with Severus, then he will protect you. The bonding ceremony allows you to choose who protects whom."

"Which means, both parties can protect each other?"

"They can if they so desire," Dumbledore replied.

"I wouldn't ever want *your protection* , Potter," Severus spat, "after all, it is you who has to be protected all the time. When do you ever protect?"

"And I would be protected like my mother's love protected me?" Harry asked, pretending not to hear Severus's sarcasm.

"Only from Voldemort; the bond will recognise your nemesis immediately. He wouldn't be able to touch you, and his spells would be considerably weaker."

"So he can still hurt and kill me. And the Death Eaters can still touch me."

"Yes, but it will take Voldemort considerably more power, especially if you bonded with a powerful wizard like Severus. Also, bear in mind that he has a tendency to forget ancient bonding magic."

"But why would we have to marry?" Harry wanted to know.

One of the portraits made a gagging sound and Phineas Nigellus pulled a horrible grimace in his picture.

"Because blood protection is an extremely intimate kind of magic, which is why only a blood relation can transfer it – or a bonded spouse."

"And one *has* to be *married* for that?" Harry asked disbelievingly.

"Yes. It is rather restrictive and far from open-minded, but that is due to the Ministry. All marriages and bonding ceremonies, for those who choose to undergo such a ceremony, are registered at the Ministry. Bonding ceremonies alone are illegal and can entail a very heavy fine or a stay in Azkaban. It is not a frequently performed ceremony, as it is said to be quite painful due to the method of withdrawing the blood."

"How is it done?"

"Taking blood from the left wrist of both spouses with a very sharp needle. The pain is part of the ritual. Protecting someone means suffering for that someone."

"The bond, contrary to an Unbreakable Vow, is automatically dissolved if the marriage ends in divorce or with the death of one of the spouses," Severus added in a bored tone.

Dumbledore was silent for a few moments before resuming:

"Marriages with bonding ceremonies have to be consummated within two weeks."

"And marriages without?" Harry said in a tight voice.

"Well…they can take their time, though procrastinating or avoiding the consummation of a marriage can lead to annulment."

"That is completely unfair! And…er, religion…faith?"

"Does not make a difference, except that bonding ceremonies, like marriage ceremonies, have all kinds of variations and procedures all around the world, according to cultural traditions."

"I still don't see why I should marry Sn – Professor Snape," Harry said stubbornly.

"Sometimes, these kind of sacrifices have to be made, my boy," Dumbledore said sadly.

"I shall never marry or bond with Potter," Severus said, his tone flat and final.

"I will have pamphlets on marriage and bonding ceremonies forwarded to both of you tomorrow," Dumbeldore announced, sounding even more final than Severus, " and I expect your answer in three days' time."

"You do realise that the consummation of such a marriage would be anything but consensual, Albus?" Severus asked Dumbledore.

"I can imagine that it would be very uncomfortable for both of you," Dumbledore admitted.

"It would be rape, Headmaster," Severus said bluntly.

"I disagree," Dumbledore answered, "and I would never have you perform a deed which made you a rapist or a murderer, Severus. That would be all. Harry, please stay."

Severus stared at his employer with smouldering black eyes before shoving back his chair roughly and striding away.

Harry gazed at Dumbledore, whom he trusted and regarded as the father, or grandfather, he had never had. He felt betrayed and angrier than he had been after Sirius's death.

"Is there no other way, sir?" he whispered.

"I can't think of any other way. The blood protection has saved your life before. And Severus is a human being, Harry. I know that he not easy to approach or to understand, but he is most suited to protect you."

"But…just because we are both attracted to men it doesn't mean that we are attracted to *each other* . In case you haven't noticed, we pretty much loathe each other, actually."

"I know, Harry. I know. I am sorry that you have to go through all this instead of enjoying your young life. Go now, my boy, and think of what I have suggested. Depending on your choice, you will have to change your quarters."

"Which means…?"

"Moving down to Severus's rooms if you choose to marry him. You would have your own bedroom and bathroom, however. I consider

them to be the most private rooms in one's quarters, as I am sure both you and Severus agree with me, and therefore not places to be shared, especially with the current state of matters between you."

Harry spent the three days closeted in Gryffindor Tower. Dobby brought him his meals, worrying more about Harry's health than Harry worried about it himself. The pamphlets on marriage and bonding ceremonies arrived from the Ministry. Harry leafed through them glumly as if they were death certificates. Once, when Harry ventured out for a walk in the grounds, he came across Severus, who had a brooding look on his face. Harry, though strongly tempted to avoid him, approached him tentatively. The black eyes frosted over with hate when they saw him.

"Potter," Severus spat.

"I was thinking that maybe we should talk this over a bit," Harry said in a small voice.

"You can think. How amazing," Severus said acidly.

"I mean…perhaps it would be better if we discussed it and came to a decision together instead of going to Professor Dumbledore's office with separate decisions."

"Remove your insufferable person from my field of view," was the sole rejoinder he got, accompanied by the Potions Master turning his back on him.

Harry wished he could have written to his friends or had had a two-way mirror to communicate with one of them, but it was impossible. Three days were not enough for Hedwig to fly back and forth. Sometimes, the wizarding way was oddly impractical when compared to the Muggle world. Hermione, who had internet access and an e-mail account, would definitely have responded within three days if Harry had had the means of e-mailing her. He actually felt thankful that Sirius was not there to witness all this. Sirius would

have killed Severus with his bare hands or given the Headmaster a good yelling. Harry nearly hated Dumbledore.

The evening of the third day approached; with a heavy heart, Harry went to Dumbledore's office. Severus Snape was already there. What had he decided? Had he already told Dumbledore?

"Harry. Please have a seat," Dumbledore said. Harry wondered how he still managed to be courteous in such unpleasant situations as he sat down on his chair.

"Well, Severus? What is your decision?"

"I accept," Severus said without preamble. His gaze however, was filled with abyssal abhorrence.

"And you, Harry?"

"I accept," Harry said, managing to sound steady instead of strangled. His stomach roiled with nervousness and uneasiness.

Dumbledore nodded.

"Good. I am glad that you have chosen reason over animosity," he said.

Severus's lip curled with scorn.

"When will the wedding and bonding ceremonies take place?" he asked curtly.

"In three days, if that is alright with you."

"You mean, alright with *you* ," Harry muttered.

Dumbledore looked tired.

"We will meet in my office. The bonding ceremony will take place after the wedding vows. The person who marries you to each other

will also be your bonder. Madam Pomfrey will supervise the second part in case one of you feels faint or passes out. I will act as your witness during both rituals."

"May we invite any friends or family?" Harry asked.

Severus raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"How sentimental," he murmured.

"It would be better if you enlightened people afterwards," Dumbledore said gently.

"Well, at least I won't have to bother with getting acquainted with any in-laws," Severus remarked cruelly.

"What about me? Will I have any…acquainting…to do afterwards?" Harry asked, controlling his temper with a big effort.

"No, you don't, Potter. I have no family or extended family, and if I did, they would never get over the shock."

Dumbledore cleared his throat delicately.

Both wizards looked at him with pale and set faces.

"You may leave, Harry. Severus, I still need a few words with you."

Harry's legs felt like sticks. He got up and left the room without looking at either Dumbledore or his future husband.

Dumbledore gazed at Severus.

"Please forgive me for all this, Severus," he sighed.

Severus shrugged.

"What has to be done has to be done," he said coldly.

"Shall I send someone to help you with the dress robes and preparations?" Dumbledore asked.

"There is no need, I have always managed on my own and do not require any help with dressing," Severus snapped.

"Dobby will be helping Harry. I am sure he would be most willing to not only assist you but to also attend to your and Harry's needs in the future."

Severus did not react.

"Well…that would be all, Severus."

Severus got up.

"Severus?"

The Head of Slytherin turned.

"You are a brave and good man. I know you will protect Harry well. I thank you for accepting this responsibility and all it entails."

Severus gave him a succinct nod in acknowledgement of his thanks and marched from the room.

"What a wretched situation," Dumbledore said into the silence of his office. The portraits around him sighed in agreement. Only Fawkes refused to yield to pessimism. He sang a short encouraging melody and returned to eating sunflower seeds.

Chapter 3

CHAPTER 3

Harry went through the next three days as if he were about to die on the fourth. He regarded those three days as the very last ones on which he would be able to enjoy himself as much as he could and be free. Marriage with Severus Snape was a pit, a prison for him out of which he would not be able to crawl until Voldemort was defeated. And no one knew how long it would take. What if it took years? Decades? He hated everyone at the moment. Dumbledore for meddling with his life all the time. Snape for being sadistic and cruel. Ron and Hermione because they were enjoying their new relationship as lovers, and the same applied to Lupin and Tonks. Everyone seemed to have a best friend or had grouped up with someone, thus drawing comfort and strength in a Voldemort-infested world.

On the last day, he received a message from Madam Pomfrey, asking him to see her in the hospital wing. He went, and she performed a few tests to check his blood and condition.

"This is compulsory before blood bonding ceremonies," she informed him. "Before, the bonded participants pressed their bleedings wrists together, but it was fortunately dropped, to be on the safe side. One never knows, especially if one or both of the participants is or are suffering from something which affects the blood. Severus already came down yesterday – everything is fine with him."

Harry, too, was soon sent off with a clean bill of health. He cried himself to sleep at night and woke up only three hours later. He lay in bed till it was breakfast time. Dobby brought him his meal and disappeared to prepare Severus for the wedding. Harry wondered how Dobby would possibly manage to accomplish his task without ending up sliced or diced. To his relief, the elf returned a short time

later, armed with an army of brushes, dress robes and other accessories. Harry tentatively asked Dobby about Severus's mood.

"We thoughts he would kill us with one gaze," Dobby squeaked, "Professor Snape was terribly angry and we tries to brush his hair…"

Harry swallowed.

"You tried to…uh…brush his hair?"

"We succeeded after we tell him that we would haves to fetch the Headmaster," Dobby whispered, spreading the dress robes, which were a sober pearl grey colour. Outside, the sun was shining happily, not caring about the trials awaiting Harry.

Dobby fussed around Harry for an hour and even summoned Winky, who had finally got over her Butterbeer addiction, for a second opinion. She gazed at Harry and clutched at her chest.

"Wonderfuls!" she gasped. Dobby beamed. Harry sighed softly.

The way to Dumbledore's office was one of the worst trips he had taken to any location. His legs seemed to become heavier and heavier as he went along, and a lump was in his throat. There was a prickling feeling in his eyes, and his chest ached with a mixture of helplessness and resentment. He numbly gave the gargoyle in front of Dumbledore's office-stairway the password. The door was open; Dumbledore and Severus were already there, together with a tall witch who was in charge of holding the ceremonies. Tables and chairs had been removed from the room, leaving a large space. Even Fawkes was absent.

"Ah, Harry, my boy. Please come inside. This is Mrs Natalia Greene; she will join you in marriage, bond you and guide you throughout the process."

Harry greeted her and then looked at Severus, who stared back him coldly. The man's hair was no longer sticking to either side of his

face. It was combed back and fell over his shoulders in soft clean waves. His robes, the same pearl grey as Harry's, fitted him very well, accentuating his tall lithe figure. Severus gave him a glacial bitter smile, revealing white teeth.

"What an honour, Potter," he said, rancour soaking every word, especially the last one.

Dumbledore threw the Potions Master a half beseeching, half irritated glance and, with an elegant gesture, indicated that Harry was to stand next to Severus. Harry obeyed. He could feel waves of hatred radiating from Severus. He himself felt empty and dull now. Dumbledore slowly closed the door of his office. The silence was heavy. Even Greene seemed to sense that this was not a happy event at all. Harry knew that she was trustworthy, which was why Dumbledore had chosen her, and that she had probably been informed about the circumstances. Her face, however, remained neutral; her manner was friendly and helpful.

The wedding ceremony was very brief, lasting for about only seven minutes. Harry and Severus repeated the lines after the witch. Severus's voice was cold and flat. Harry supposed his own voice sounded the same. Dumbledore watched everything solemnly, the twinkle gone from his blue eyes. Plain gold rings, ordered by Dumbledore, were exchanged. Severus did not bother glancing at Harry as he gripped Harry's left hand and put the ring on him. He released Harry's hand very quickly, as if in fear of contamination.

"You may kiss each other," Greene finished.

"I would gladly substitute the double 's' with a double 'l'," Severus ground out.

"Severus," Dumbledore said sharply. Harry flushed and stared at the wall. Greene displayed excellent self-control and ignored the spiteful remark.

"Gentlemen, may I ask you to kindly sign the marriage contract?"

She held up a piece of parchment. Dumbledore summoned a coffee table. Severus signed first. He thrust the quill at Harry, who signed next. Finally, Dumbledore provided his signature, confirming his role as a witness. Greene carefully folded the parchment and flicked her wand. It disappeared in a shower of sparks.

"The Ministry will register your marriage automatically. Do you wish to proceed directly with the bonding ceremony or would you prefer a short break?"

"Directly," Severus said curtly. Harry nodded. Dumbledore moved towards the door and opened it to admit Poppy Pomfrey, who would supervise the bloodletting ceremony.

The newlyweds were asked to remove their footwear, as the bonding ceremony was always accomplished barefoot as a sign of naturalness and also modesty in the face of such a powerful and intimate form of magic.

"Please sit down on the floor and hold hands," Greene instructed them. Harry and Severus did as they were told, clasping hands. The witch drew dark-red circles around their left ankles with her wand.

"The circles will disappear after you have fulfilled the bond," she explained. Harry knew that she was referring to the consummation thereof. His stomach lurched a little, and he pressed Severus's hand convulsively without realising it. Severus spread his hand abruptly, forcing Harry to loosen his grasp. Greene drew out two long fine needles. Their tips were serrated.

"Severus Snape, you have chosen to be Harry Potter's protector; you will be pierced with this needle first, and your spouse after you."

Severus rolled back the sleeve on his left arm, revealing the Death Eater's mark. Greene maintained her professionalism; nothing in her face changed as she placed a shallow container underneath Severus's arm. Sitting down, she plunged the needle into Severus's vein. Madam Pomfrey kept her eyes fixed on the Slytherin.

Severus's face was blank; he did not give the tiniest sign of pain as the blood trickled slowly into the bowl; the pressure of his fingers around Harry's remained the same. The bloodletting took five minutes. Afterwards, Greene healed Severus's wrist and turned to Harry, the second needle in her hand while Madam Pomfrey put aside the first needle. Harry was sure that he was pale. He bared his left forearm and managed to suppress a gasp of pain as the needle tore into his skin. It was painful but not too difficult to bear. Harry was relieved that he had managed to avoid squeezing Severus's hand a second time and thus betraying a sign of discomfort. At last, the needle was withdrawn and his wound healed. A small gold bowl was produced; Greene muttered an incantation over Harry's and Severus's blood. She picked up the receptacles and poured their contents into the bowl at the same time. A red tongue of flame shot up from the heart of the bowl.

"Albus," the witch said, and the Headmaster came forwards with a beautiful flask, bejewelled with rubies, pearls and tiny colourful beads. He took out the ornate stopper, and Greene transferred the mixed blood to it. Dumbledore closed the flask and sealed it with a spell, followed by an Unbreakable Charm.

Finally, the two wizards had to walk, hand in hand, three times around the room in a circle with the witch following them and chanting protective spells in Latin. They left a shining trail of gold in their wake; it fluctuated and slowly disappeared after the three rounds had been completed. Severus dug his nails vindictively into Harry's palm as the young wizard walked next to him, not hard enough to actually hurt, but hard enough to express his resentment. Harry stared straight ahead of him, years of endurance and painful experience sustaining him.

The bonding ceremony ended with the signing of another parchment, the bonding contract, and blessings from the witch. She and Madam Pomfrey took their leave of the wizards; Harry and Severus remained with Dumbledore, who studied their faces gravely.

"I wish you all the best, Harry and Severus, in spite of the circumstances. Take care of yourselves – and of each other, my boys."

He embraced each wizard separately. Harry could have cried as Dumbledore hugged him.

Then everything was over for good, and he and Severus were standing outside in the corridor, making sure not to look at each other.

"I suppose you shall have to accompany me to your new…home," Severus said a tight angry voice.

Harry chose not to speak.

"Come along instead of sulking, Potter," Severus hissed, striding away.

Harry followed him. He did not want to even imagine how they were going to consummate their bonding in two weeks.

Chapter 4

CHAPTER 4

A/N: Dear all, I am very glad you liked the bonding ceremony. I got the idea of the participants accomplishing it barefoot from Hindu weddings. Not accomplishing the marriage ceremony barefoot (or not visiting a Hindu temple barefoot, for that matter) is considered an insult. I did a lot of reading up on this and read accounts of people attending Hindu weddings (Bollywood films do tend to gloss up stuff, and I was searching for authenticity). The dark-red circles on Harry's and Severus's ankles were inspired by the henna designs drawn on the hands and feet of a Hindu bride; also, the couple has to walk seven times around a holy fire while the priest chants mantras and blessings, so I had Severus and Harry walk around the room (if not around a holy fire) three times, since three is considered a special number by many societies and cultures. The rest was freely invented. I spent a long time "creating" the bonding ceremony, so I'm glad it paid off :-)

Harry followed his husband down to the dungeons. Severus finally stopped in front of a door bearing a picture of a serpent twined around a Potions pestle.

" *I hate my mate* ," he said, and the door swung back to admit them.

"I am sure the password will suit you, too," he flung at Harry over his shoulder, "I changed it for your benefit yesterday."

Harry grimly hung on to his silence. The place, contrary to what Harry had expected, was tastefully and handsomely furnished with subdued colours, mainly brown, off-white and grey. An enormous oriental carpet of a dark-green shade covered the area near the fireplace. Severus strode ahead of Harry.

"My bathroom, and my bedroom. Don't you dare venture in either of these two rooms, or in this one, which is my laboratory. In fact…" He bent slightly and stared into Harry's green eyes menacingly, "…if I ever catch you in one of these rooms, I will make you feel…very… very…very sorry for your transgression."

Harry stared back defiantly.

"Oh. Threatening your husband. That just may fall under domestic violence, even if this is the wizarding world," he said bravely.

"Husband of mine," Severus said with utter contempt, "acting smart with me is a singularly foolish thing to do."

They glared into each other's eyes.

"This is where you will stay, my dear Harry Potter. Your bedroom and bathroom. It should meet your needs. If you bring any friends down here, then you will entertain them in your room."

"So at least I may bring my friends here."

Severus's lip curled.

"Unfortunately. We don't want you throwing a fit, do we? The Headmaster suggested that I grant you access to my private library. Should you mess with my books, Potter, then I will withdraw my permission, and not even Dumbledore will be able to re-establish forages into the library for the one and only Golden Boy. Well… beloved…" Severus sneered, pronouncing "beloved" with appalling venom, "this is where you will live until we can obtain a divorce. Speaking of which…"

He pulled a sheaf of papers out of one pocket.

"These, Potter, are divorce papers. The sooner we defeat the Dark Lord, husband of mine, the sooner we can end this atrocious

marriage farce. I am looking forward to the moment we can send these to the Ministry."

Harry was too unhappy to say anything.

"You will kindly take all your meals in your room. The less I see of your face, the better."

"And what about the…uh…the…consummation?" Harry blurted out.

"We will consummate our marriage and bond in exactly two weeks from now. Considering our relationship, I will have to help matters with a few potions."

"Help matters?"

Severus crossed his arms upon his chest.

"Do you expect me to achieve an erection around you, Potter?"

Harry reddened with embarrassment.

"I strongly doubt that you will feel very…exhilarated…in my presence, Potter, or appreciate forceful entry. A potion which will induce arousal and one for numbing pain should suffice. You should have just enough brains to figure out who will consume which potion."

There was a very unpleasant silence.

"I do not suppose that you have ever had sexual intercourse?" Severus asked abruptly.

Harry shook his head.

"Answer me verbally when I speak to you," Severus spat.

"No, never before. What about you?" Harry asked boldly.

Severus's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Do not think you can take liberties with me just because you are bound to me with two pathetic pieces of parchment, Potter," he enunciated slowly, as if talking to someone of limited understanding ability.

"And what about my Defense Against The Arts training lessons?"

"We'll see about that later," Severus said in a bored tone.

The news of their marriage was splashed all over the newspapers in no time at all; Howlers poured in every day. Harry had written to his friends immediately as soon as Severus had shown him around his rooms, giving them the true facts behind the distorted versions media like *The Daily Prophet* sported. The Howlers were hurtful, insulting Harry vehemently; but it was Severus who had to take the brunt. He was accused of paedophilia, bringing Harry over to the Dark Side, using the Imperius Curse on him etc. Mrs Weasley, however, wrote a very affectionate note to both Harry and Severus, wishing them happiness and health. She also wrote a separate letter to Harry, reassuring him that Severus would take care of him even if he was "rather sensitive and short-tempered", and that he could trust him as much as he could trust Hagrid. Hermione, Ron, Lupin and Tonks were equally supportive; together with the Order, they had been informed of the circumstances by Dumbledore and were prepared.

Hermione and Ron sent him a long encouraging letter ("we decided to write this letter together because Ron would have included one of the twins' tricks to hex Snape", "Harry, Hermione is far too lenient with Snape, if he's bothering you, tell me and I'll deal with him, mate!" "Ron, I should cancel that line you just wrote! Sorry about that, Harry…"). It brought a smile to Harry's face and he tucked it underneath his pillow. Although they were a couple, they still seemed to enjoy bickering and even expressing it in writing.

Lupin's missive was very kind and he backed up Mrs Weasley, saying that Harry could trust Severus with his life and that he would soon get used to Severus's "eccentricities". On a most happy note, Tonks and he had married very quietly, and they were eager to start a family. He expressed his relief that his werewolf-condition could not be passed on genetically, but that they would have to wait with getting a child because Tonks was related with Bellatrix Lestrange, who was cold-blooded enough to inflict cruel damage on her sister's family. Lupin's letter reminded Harry unintentionally of the huge burden which weighed him down. Defeating Voldemort meant that people would be able to continue with their lives and worry less about their loved ones.

In the meantime, Severus treated Harry like air. Once, when Harry was reading in Severus's private library, Severus himself stepped into the room. Catching sight of Harry, his lip curled and he left directly as if some noxious gas had poisoned the room. He did announce to Harry, however, that Harry would not waste his time sitting around on his backside. Harry was to start his training for the Defense Against The Dark Arts post and take Duelling lessons with Severus – and, much to his horror, resume Occlumency with him. His scar prickled occasionally, and he would have nightmares or blurry visions of Voldemort giving orders he couldn't understand to his Death Eaters, or threatening someone – or killing people.

On the second day after their marriage, Severus was summoned by Voldemort, who, as Severus reported to both Harry and Dumbledore in the latter's office, was delighted with what had taken place. Voldemort, as Dumbledore had foreseen, was of the opinion that Dumbledore had taken this drastic step in order to protect Harry. Voldemort had asked Severus to torture Harry as much as possible behind Dumbledore's back and drag the young wizard to him once Severus had found a way to bypass the protection of Hogwarts castle. It was a pity, Voldemort said, that Dumbledore did not allow Severus to take his new husband with him for the meetings in order to deepen their "acquaintance", as Voldemort put it.

Thus, two weeks passed quickly; Harry soon became used to the unwelcome atmosphere in Severus's rooms and to the fact that although he was Severus's husband, the rooms were not his home at all. What he could not get used to at all was the thought of consummating his bond with the brooding Potions Master. On the last day of the two weeks, Harry slept very badly, tossing and turning in bed. His virginity seemed more precious to him than ever. He would never have dreamt of losing it this way. As the day proceeded, Harry grew increasingly nervous. Hermione and Ron had given him a chain of white gold for his seventeenth birthday; he had not taken it off ever since. Now, he found himself touching it all the time, thinking of his friends and trying to stay calm. Severus seemed to treat him with more frostiness than ever, not even glancing at him. Finally, at night, Severus knocked on Harry's door. At least he respected Harry's privacy and did not just enter.

Harry opened the door.

"Come," Severus said tersely.

Harry followed Severus out of his room. When I come back here, I will no longer be the same, Harry thought. A lump threatened to constrict his windpipe. Severus led him into his bedroom. It was as elegantly furnished as the other rooms, with stylish wooden furniture and a spacious four-poster bed with the same pearl grey sheets as the wedding robes they had worn.

Harry's legs were trembling. No Gryffindor qualities could help him with what was before him. House values had ceased to be important to him long ago. Severus looked at him.

"I was thinking of giving you a Calming Potion, but it will make you sleepy. Since I do not want to be accused of drugging you and taking advantage of potential sleepiness, I shall use a product with a numbing agent when I prepare you for penetration. If you feel any pain in spite of the numbing agent, tell me and we will stop immediately. I will do my best to ensure that this is painless for you, and I will be using protection," he said, his voice as cold as ever.

"The wizarding world is as dependent on condoms as the muggle one."

Harry nodded.

"Sit down."

Harry obeyed, sitting down at the foot of the bed. Severus cast him a dark brooding look and went over to the dresser. He retrieved a vial.

"I will drink this, and we will wait for five minutes."

Harry nodded feebly. Severus downed the potion. It was easy for Harry to guess that it would make Severus achieve arousal. Severus walked out of the room, probably to prepare himself mentally and physically for what was in store for them.

Five minutes, only five minutes more, I can't do this, I can't bear this, this is worse than all I have experienced, if not worse than the night I saw Cedric Diggory die, oh God, what shall I do? I am trapped in this loveless marriage, and I have to let myself be invaded by a man who loathes me…

Severus's voice pierced his desperate thoughts; he had re-entered the room without the slightest sound.

"Remove your trousers and underwear and lie down on your stomach."

Harry obeyed mechanically. His hands were sweaty.

He folded his clothes and lay down on the bed, his bare backside and legs exposed. He had never felt so vulnerable and disgusted before. Severus knelt down behind him and Harry heard him unzip his trousers and push them down. He felt a hand on the small of his back, pinning him to the mattress. He began to pray frantically for strength. He wanted to throw up. He nearly screamed when

something cold was smeared between his buttocks. A moment later, his virginity was shattered.

Severus took Harry swiftly, who remained rigid underneath him. He remained motionless for a few seconds, waiting for Harry to adjust to him. Then he moved briskly, intent on getting it over as fast as possible. He came joylessly after a few minutes – a vague shivery sensation which was technically an orgasm and not much else. It left him with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. Harry remained completely still throughout the ordeal, his fingers digging into the pillow for support, his body stiff and unwilling. A stifled sob was wrenched from him when Severus pulled out of him. It was a pitiful forlorn sound in the big room. Severus got up from the bed. He bent and touched Harry's shoulder briefly. It earned him an abrupt reaction.

"Don't touch me!" Harry said in a choked voice.

"Please dress and go back to your room," Severus said, his tone dead and flat. He went to the bathroom, leaving Harry to his own devices. Harry leapt out of bed, struggled into his underwear and trousers and fled. He headed for the shower immediately and stood underneath the pelting water for at least half an hour, feeling filthy and humiliated. Sobs escaped from his chest. He scrubbed at his body until his skin protested by stinging and turning red. He repeatedly applied soap to that part which had been robbed of its sanctity.

He had not felt any physical pain. Severus had been brisk but careful with him. The silence during the act had been crushing enough. The worst had been the cold dead look on his husband's thin pallid face, the harshness etched upon his features.

"Never again," Harry whispered, "I will never ever let anyone do this to me again."

He got out of the shower. He looked down at his left ankle and saw that the dark-red band had disappeared. He wished it were still

there.

"Never again."

Chapter 5

CHAPTER 5

A/N: "De Amicitia" (the password to Gryffindor Tower in this chapter) refers to a work written by Cicero.

Harry went to bed curled up in a foetal position, knees pulled up to his chest. He felt cold in spite of the warm bedclothes. He knew it was the shock. He also knew that it would take time to get over the emotionless mechanical coupling with his husband. He clenched his fists, hate for Severus overwhelming him. His husband. He wanted to vomit at the thought. His *husband* .

The next morning found him in Severus's library, simply staring ahead of him. He had not crossed the Potions Master as yet, but he would have to see him at some point of the day or the other. Sure enough, Severus entered the library after Harry had been there for an hour, a book in one hand and a glass of water in the other.

He gave Harry a level stare, and his mouth became even thinner.

"I bet you enjoyed yourself last night," Harry said.

A spark of rage flickered in Severus's dark eyes.

"And what makes you come to such a brilliant conclusion?" he asked, his voice nearly a whisper. Harry recognised the threatening whisper as a danger sign – he had heard it more than enough times as a student. He stood up and took a few steps towards Severus, who narrowed his eyes slightly.

"It was easy for you to just get on top of me and *fuck* me!" he spat.

Severus's left hand twitched, as if he was about to raise it and slap Harry in the face. He maintained control, however, and mastered the

impulse, simply directing an icy stare at Harry, making the young wizard flush.

"Everything is about you, you and you! Harry Potter, so heroic, such a martyr! Do you think I leapt into matrimony with joy?"

"You-" Harry began, but Severus quelled him with another murderous gaze. "I have gone through hell to protect your sorry ass all these years, I have lied to the Dark Lord and given my life to protect your worthless self! I did what I could to alleviate any pain you would feel during the act, and you knew that we both had no choice. The Headmaster answered all your questions and provided you with more than enough information."

"You-"

"I had to take a potion in order to be able to complete the act. Do you honestly think I would have been able to be aroused at the mere thought of what both you and I had to do?"

"YOU MADE SURE TO HUMILIATE ME AS MUCH AS YOU COULD! YOU GOT ON TOP OF ME AND *TORE* ME AND MADE SURE THAT I WAS INFERIOR TO YOU IN EVERY POSSIBLE WAY YOU COULD THINK OF!" Harry shouted at the top of his voice, "YOU ARE A SICK PERVERTED ASSHOLE!"

The slap came this time: Severus backhanded Harry with such force that the young wizard staggered back.

"GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!" Snape roared, smashing his glass against the wall, "JUST GET OUT! YOU ARE JUST LIKE YOUR FATHER! SELF-CENTRED AND ARROGANT!"

Harry stared at him, his breath coming in shallow sobs now, burning tears running down his face.

"You have no heart, you cannot feel," he whispered before running to his room. The door crashed closed behind him. Their row made

things even worse than Harry could have possibly imagined; in the afternoon, Severus knocked on Harry's door, and when Harry opened, he fixated him with an icy stare.

"I have the misfortune of continuing your education, beloved," he said scornfully. "I therefore suggest that you stop pining for your lost virginity-"

He was interrupted by Harry pulling out his wand and aiming it at him.

"You are responsible for that loss," Harry said flatly.

"Husband of mine, I further suggest that you indulge in your childish destructive tendencies during your Duelling lessons," Severus sneered, "and I won't have anyone pointing their wand at me in my rooms."

He grabbed Harry's wand-arm and glowered into his face.

"Have you understood, Potter?"

"Yes," Harry choked out, his voice thick with fury.

"We are going to practise Duelling, Potter. I don't suppose we have to feign any animosity, do we, beloved?"

He led Harry to an empty classroom in the dungeons and ordered him to stand opposite him and draw out his wand.

The Duelling lesson was as bad as an Occlumency lesson. Severus kept belittling Harry, mockingly calling him "beloved", which became a warped word. Robbed of its original meaning, it was the embodiment of hate, repulsion and all things hurtful. It was the same with other terms of endearment. Thus, "husband of mine", uttered by Severus, always dripped with loathing, implying that Harry was the last person he would have ever chosen to marry.

Another shouting match was the inevitable result.

"You're so pathetic, no one would ever freely consent to marry someone like you!" Harry yelled, stuffing his wand into his pocket and rubbing at a burn mark on the knee of his robes.

"And do you think I would have joyfully consented to spend my wedding night with a replica of James Potter?" Severus whispered back, placing the tip of his wand against Harry's chest. "It was like, to use a current term, 'doing' a corpse, Potter."

Harry went pale before he spat back:

"Well, I would not be surprised if you knew what doing a corpse is like. Only a corpse would endure your ministrations, beloved," he said, infusing the last word with loathing.

"Indeed?" Severus answered, sneering, "you certainly had no other choice than to endure my, ah, ministrations, husband of mine."

"I hate you," Harry breathed.

"The feeling is mutual and the only thing we share in common, Potter," Severus remarked coolly, withdrawing his wand and thrusting Harry away from him, "go back to your room and pull yourself together."

Harry turned his back on Severus and left. Severus sat down at a desk and buried his face in his hands. A sharp *crack!* near him made him start up. It was Dobby.

"Master Snape, the Headmaster wishes to see you," he announced.

Severus nodded curtly.

"I'm on my way," he said, and Dobby disappeared. Severus stood up, smoothing his robes and pushing back his hair. He had to admit that Potter's elf-friend had done an excellent job with it on his wedding day, washing, rinsing and combing it expertly; but he would

never admit that he had decided to use the house-elf's hair care methods.

Soon, he was seated opposite Dumbledore.

"Severus, my boy, how are you?"

Severus shrugged.

"As usual."

"How are things with Harry?"

"The bonding was consummated, if that is what you wish to know, Albus," Severus said bluntly.

"I was not wondering about that, Severus. I was wondering whether you and Harry are getting along more or less. I understand that it is a difficult situation for both of you."

"Oh, I know how well you understand, Albus. It is no problem for you if two people who loathe each other end up in blissful marriage. Or if both spouses are semi-traumatised after consummating their bond, and are rowing half the time because of it."

Albus stared down at his desk and sighed.

"Is there no hope at all that you and Harry will ever get on, Severus?" he asked gently.

"None at all," Severus affirmed coolly.

"In that case, Severus, I will have someone else take over Harry's Duelling lessons, and I am sure Minerva will assist Alastor with Harry's training program in your stead. Kingsley Shacklebolt would be an excellent Duelling instructor."

"What about Occlumency?"

"Harry has told me that he has been receiving less visions and nightmares through his scar, and that if he does have visions, then they are blurred and foggy. Maybe we will just have to let Occlumency go, Severus. Harry has too many emotions to deal with, at least at the moment."

"At the moment? All the time is more appropriate," Severus snorted, "it makes him feel important. He craves attention, just like his father."

Albus closed his eyes.

"Severus…You know and I know that you are shifting your resentment towards James Potter and Sirius Black onto Harry. Harry does resemble them in some ways, Severus. He looks a lot like his father, but his eyes and personality are more like his mother's. He is kind-hearted, innocent and loyal in spite of all he has gone through and is still going through. Voldemort has robbed him of so much, including of his youth. How well do you really know Harry without associating him with James and other unpleasant memories, Severus? Try to approach him, and I am sure he will reciprocate the effort."

"With all due respect, Headmaster…that sounds like…quack psychology. Don't you think the boy will be suspicious if I suddenly try to baby-sit him?"

Dumbledore shook his head slowly.

"I see that it is a hopeless case. Harry is a topic on which you and I disagree. Good night, Severus. However, please be so kind as to tell Harry that he is to come to my office now."

Severus nodded, knowing how disappointed Dumbledore was in him, and whisked away in his black robes.

"The Headmaster wants to see you, Potter," Severus informed Harry, who was just leaving Severus's library. Harry ignored him and stalked out of their rooms.

"Harry, I called you to tell you that you will be taking Duelling lessons with Kingsley Shacklebolt. Occlumency is cancelled, and instead of Severus, Minerva McGonagall will train you for the Defense Against the Dark Arts post with Alastor Moody."

"So I'll have no more lessons with Snape," Harry said with grim relief.

"Yes. No more lessons. I have realised that it is useless to ever hope for reconciliation between you two. I hope you manage to find a way of living together in your rooms until Voldemort can be defeated. And there is someone who would like to see you."

"Who, sir?"

"You'll see when you reach Gryffindor Tower. The password is "De Amicitia".

Harry fairly sprinted to Gryffindor Tower and stopped in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady, gasping out the password.

"Nice to see you again, dear," the Fat Lady beamed, granting him access to the empty common room.

"Harry!" a very familiar voice exclaimed.

"Hermione!"

He flung his arms around his friend, burying his face in her shoulder and repeating her name in an unsteady voice.

Hermione took Harry's hand and guided him to the place they had always occupied with Ron when they were students. She was looking very pretty with her long curly hair tied back with a clip and pale blue robes.

"Harry, how are you? You've lost weight."

"Hermione…I…It's been…rough. But tell me first: how are you and Ron and everyone else?"

"We're all fine, Harry, Ron sends you lots of hugs, he couldn't come because of his Auror training. He says he misses you."

"It's good he's alone, Hermione. I always got the impression that he felt like he was standing, you know, in my shadow. Now he can do his own thing, and I'm really glad he can be kind of free."

"That's a very nice thing to say, Harry. Now I want to hear your news. I wrote to Professor Dumbledore and he was so kind, he told me to come to the castle whenever I wanted to and to simply inform him beforehand so that they can lift the wards on the Floo network for me."

Harry smiled, then became serious. He began to tell her his story. First he spoke slowly, and then faster. He described the consummation of his bonding night very briefly; it was too personal, too raw, too hurtful, and it also involved Severus's privacy. He finished with Dumbledore's statement that he had given up hope where Harry's and Severus's relationship was concerned. Hermione listened to him without interrupting him, pressing his hand from time to time. She was silent for a few moments.

"Harry, I know that this is hard for you. But maybe you should think what Snape feels about it all. I mean…you're in the media, you're getting all the attention, people are wondering whether you're happy, even though it's a nuisance to have your life dragged out all over the papers. You said that the worst of the Howlers were directed at him. But no one bothers about Snape's feelings. What must he feel like reading all the rubbish about him using you as his sex toy and stuff? And he, too, was forced to consummate the bond against his will. I bet he feels awful about it. I know I would feel miserable."

"He has no heart. How can he feel anything?"

"He is not heartless, Harry. The fact that he is so bitter and angry is proof for that, and he is protecting you. You may not like to be reminded of this, Harry, but he has saved your life more than once.

He married you and bonded with you to protect you. He could have refused. That's very generous of him, Harry."

"Snape the martyr?" Harry snorted.

"Harry, you know what I mean. He is very brave."

"Well, I'll survive somehow. Snape's already got the divorce papers. He says that as soon as we get rid of Voldemort, we can go separate ways. I'm already looking forward."

Hermione sighed.

"Harry…maybe you could try working on this relationship. You're only thinking of breaking it up."

"For fuck's sake, Hermione!" Harry shouted, standing up. "One would think you'd never seen that bastard before! You know how cruel he is. And you expect me to actually work on my relationship with that asshole? How can you defend him?"

Hermione remained calm.

"Yelling at me and calling him names is not going to help matters, Harry. You asked me what you should do, and if you don't like what I am saying, then there is nothing else I can say."

There was a heavy silence.

"Sorry, Hermione. I'm really sorry. You didn't come all the way here to be yelled at."

He put his arm around her shoulder.

"It's okay, Harry. I understand you."

"You reckon that Snape feels as humiliated and ashamed of that night as I do?"

"Yes. Definitely."

"Even though he did the penetrating?"

Hermione looked rather pained.

"Harry, he had to take a potion to consummate the bond. I mean… how humiliating is that?"

"Yeah…He touched my shoulder…after the…afterwards. And I told him not to touch me…"

"Try talking with him, Harry. Just try. And…er…try to remain calm. You can do it. He is very cynical, and you've got to try and get through to him slowly."

"How can I? He hates me."

"He doesn't know you. He hated and still hates your father. If there is a way to make him see *you* , Harry, then things could change for the better."

Hermione reached out and ruffled his hair with one hand.

"We've done such a lot of impossible stuff, Harry. Remember our third year, with the time-turner and all? Snape is caught in the past. He has to be brought to the present."

"I wish he were listening to you," Harry smiled.

She laughed.

"I know it's easy to say all this. Still, you and he are bound to each other by marriage and blood. That's a really powerful bond."

Harry nodded.

"I'll speak to him. I'll try, if he doesn't chuck me out first."

"He won't. You're going to turn eighteen very soon. You'll be an adult in the Muggle world as well. Tell him so if he threatens to throw you out."

"Yeah…In three days…Eighteen…"

They chatted for a long time, looking back on their days as students. Harry was sorry when Hermione gently insisted that she had to leave. He hugged her warmly, saw her off and reluctantly went back to his rooms, Hermione's words running though his mind. It was ridiculous. Severus and he hated each other, there was too much history between them…On the other hand, he could not bear the thought of having to live like this for goodness knows how many months. The man was his husband. Powerful magic bound them, as did the fact that Severus had saved Harry's life. Hermione was right – she nearly always was. He had to try and talk to Severus, or get Severus to talk.

Chapter 6

CHAPTER 6

Bear-Bell: Severus uses "beloved", "husband of mine" and other terms of endearments to imply the opposite of what they actually mean. He is being extremely sarcastic and hurtful by doing so. Harry starts imitating him. It is stated in the previous chapter that the endearments between them are warped and express dislike. Hope that clarified things.

Harry reached the door to their rooms. He did not like going back inside. He felt as unwelcome and unwanted as he had felt at the Dursleys. On the other hand, he was freer with Severus than he had been with the Dursleys. Severus avoided him scrupulously, he could do magic, had access to the library, was not starved and treated like rubbish by three people at once (although Severus was a formidable challenge), could go out for rides on his broomstick, had no chores to do etc. And, of course, Dumbledore was around. Still, it did not change the fact that Severus and he could not abide each other.

"Stupid password," he grumbled, glaring at the portrait. Then he frowned. He was sure that the snake coiled around the pestle had just blinked.

He took a step forwards.

The head of the snake turned towards him.

"You are his husband and share the Potions Master's rooms. He has not said that you are not allowed to change the password," she hissed in a good-natured manner.

"I may change the password?" Harry asked, automatically speaking in Parseltongue.

"Ah! A Parseltongue! Wonderful! Bilingualism is always an asset," the snake answered.

"Well…Uhm…I actually found out by accident that I can speak Parseltongue," Harry said uncomfortably, remembering what Dumbledore had said about Voldemort unintentionally transferring some of his powers to him.

"A modest wizard, too. Perhaps a little insecure, somewhat like the man who lived alone for ages in here before he married you."

Harry preferred not to dwell on Severus's insecurities or on his.

"I am Harry Potter. And you are?"

"Who doesn't know who you are? All the pictures in the castle are speaking about your marriage. I am Nessa."

"Nessa. I like it," Harry said.

"Thank you, young man. This place can always use a breath of fresh air. It reeks of stagnation. Now, have you got a new password in mind?"

Harry thought hard. He toyed with the idea of choosing a password which would annoy Severus but decided against it. It would be immature, to say nothing of potentially dangerous for his personal safety.

" *Monkshood and wolfsbane* ," he said finally, recalling his very first Potions lesson.

"I think the Potions Master will like your choice," Nessa remarked with approving beady eyes.

"Oh, and please don't tell him the new password at once. Let him… uh…try a bit and figure it out with hints. Oh, and would it be possible to not change the password for a month?"

Nessa made a hissing staccato sound which sounded suspiciously like a snicker.

"I am surmising that the Potions Master did not consult you on the first password."

"He didn't."

"One month it is. When he changes the password, I'll tell you at once. You are a Parseltongue and he is not. Moreover, you are a lot more…civil."

"Thank you, Nessa," Harry smiled.

Severus was not in their rooms; everything was dark. Severus usually left the lights on in the hall, even if he was in another room. Harry could not help grinning vindictively. Severus would come back and discover that the password had been changed by his nemesis. It was another half an hour before Severus returned.

"HARRY POTTER!" he roared, stepping inside the room, his black eyes narrowed ominously.

Harry emerged from his bedroom.

"I thought you would like the password, it deals with Potions," he said innocently.

"You changed the password without my permission," Severus snarled, "and that disobedient snake informed me that it will stay the same for a month!"

"I found the first password rather discouraging," Harry said calmly.

"I am a factual man, Potter," Severus retorted, striding towards Harry and glaring into his green eyes.

"If you were factual, then-" Harry broke off. This was not talking to the man. It was quarrelling.

"May I call you Severus?" he asked.

Severus raised an eyebrow at the unexpected question.

"I mean…we are married and bonded," Harry added, "so I feel weird calling you by your last name even though we are retaining our own last names."

"I am quite aware of that, Potter," Severus barked. "But don't ever expect me to deign to call you by your first name. And there's another thing."

His gaze crackled.

"You accuse me of being a pervert and have the gall to point out that we are married?" he breathed fiercely.

"Severus, I wanted to…talk. I mean…you know…I don't want to quarrel with you anymore and…I'm sorry for yelling at you and saying what I did."

Severus stared at him.

"Are you sure you are feeling well, Potter?"

Harry flushed angrily.

"We're going to have to live together for quite some time. You are my husband and my Protector, due to our blood bond. That's more than just pieces of parchments connecting us. Quite apart from the fact that I owe you my life."

"What has brought on this sudden plunge into remorse and reason?" Severus asked with a sneer. "Did hitting your arrogant conceited face have such a beneficial effect and rattle the few brains your possess into something that resembles thinking?"

Harry continued staunchly, refusing to retreat in the face of Severus's withering contempt.

"You were forced to do…it…the consummation. It was non-consensual for both of us," Harry said at last, "and I am sorry that I accused you of forcing me. It was wrong of me. We were both forced…This whole thing is wrong."

"Of course this whole thing is wrong, Potter. Things always go wrong around you."

"My father and godfather are dead, but you continue hating them, and you hate me because of the past," Harry said tiredly.

"Spare me your outbursts of sentimentalism and psychological assessments, Potter."

"Look…I'm trying to make an effort," Harry said in a strained voice.

"Make the effort to remove yourself out of my way and sight, Potter."

"Do we really have to live together like this?"

"The Golden Boy expects to live harmoniously with me for his own peace of mind. Husband of mine, you are a spoilt coddled brat who was probably worshipped on knees by his awed relatives-"

"That's a lie," Harry whispered, "and you know it. You saw into my mind during the Occlumency lessons. I was never spoilt and coddled. I never had a real family, Severus. Never. The Weasleys are the closest people I have for a family and Hogwarts the closest thing to a home. And you, whether you want to admit it or not, are family, and your rooms have become my home, although I am unwelcome in them."

Severus was silent. The two wizards stared at each other for a few moments. Then Harry turned and went back to his bedroom.

"I give up, Hermione," he said to the wall.

The weather was beautiful on Harry's birthday. Severus sourly observed the owls swoop to his husband with presents and notes.

He himself did not bother to wish Harry a happy birthday or give him a gift. Even Nessa the snake and the ghosts remembered his birthday. Harry spent the day with Hagrid, who noticed Harry's dejection in spite of Harry's valiant efforts.

"Did Snape get yeh anything for yer birthday, Harry?" he asked shrewdly.

Harry flushed and shook his head.

"Why should he? He hates me, Hagrid," he said.

"He's yer husband. I guess yeh got ter be patient, Harry. Snape's a bit…sensitive," Hagrid said delicately.

"His birthday is on January 9th. It's on our marriage contract. Still got plenty of time to think of what to get him. Perhaps something with which to decapitate me."

"Ah, Harry. Yeh'll see. Things'll settle down. Got ter think positive. Snape's yer Protector. He'll take care of yeh, and I bet yeh'll take care of him too."

He patted Harry on the back, and Fang put his head on Harry's knee.

Severus was absent when he returned to the hostility of the dungeons. When he came back, he found Harry sitting on the sofa, reading.

"Your intellectual pursuits do not impress me, Potter," he drawled.

"Where were you?" Harry asked curiously, looking at his husband's travelling cloak.

"Where do you think, beloved?" Severus snapped.

"Did Voldemort call you?"

"Do not say his name!"

"I am your husband, not your student!" Harry flared.

"Most unfortunately," Severus remarked coolly, removing his cloak.

"Was the meeting, er, okay?" Harry asked persistently.

"It was wonderful, Potter. The Dark Lord hosted a cocktail party and played the fiddle to us afterwards," Severus said acidly.

"I just wanted to know," Harry said, his temper starting to wear thin.

"The Dark Lord was and is especially interested in my sexual explorations of your scrawny body, Potter."

Harry stared at his feet.

"Entertaining him with elaborate fake memories is so relaxing, Potter. You can't imagine it," Severus whispered furiously, striding out of the room and slamming the door.

Harry stood up and slowly went back to his bedroom. What a way for his birthday to end! He sat down on his bed, surrounded by the letters and presents from his friends. He felt better after going through them all again.

Chapter 7

CHAPTER 7

Severus Snape was sitting on his bed, staring at the wall, hands folded. He went over his conversation with Voldemort.

"Tell me, Severus. How is the boy doing? Is he docile?"

"He is still rather squeamish, my Lord. Recalcitrant. It makes it quite entertaining, actually."

"Ah, Severus, I always knew you had a decidedly…naughty streak in you," Voldemort said appreciatively, "do you heal him afterwards or let him be a bit uncomfortable?"

"I prefer healing him so that I can get the most out of my pleasure. He is so much more…tight when healed. And the others in the castle would notice if he were to adopt a straddling gait."

"Severus, you think of everything. It is truly admirable."

"Thank you, my Lord. I am also thinking of using…other methods and tools on him. He does tend to struggle."

"Torture him into submission, Severus. As I said, he may be more fun to keep alive and train as one of my faithful servants…"

Severus felt sick. He had had to show Voldemort fake memories of verbally and sexually abusing Harry. Voldemort had half closed his eyes with pleasure. He had also displayed an even more harrowing version of their consummation.

You took him by force, Severus? This is marvellous news!

But he had taken Harry forcefully. He had had no other choice. The preparation, the potions and all that he had used to facilitate

penetration and take away as much of the discomfort as possible seemed to be nothing than a lame excuse for justifying rape. He felt like a rapist, in spite of what Harry had just said beforehand. The young man had even apologised for their situation. Harry's apology was wrong. His accusation, that Severus was a pervert, seemed closer to the truth. He recalled the consummation, Harry's sob in the end and that fierce "Don't touch me!" when he had laid his hand upon Harry's shoulder – a clumsy and completely useless gesture of apology. Severus had a poor opinion of love and social interaction. Dumbledore was the only person he could call a friend. On the other hand, he desperately craved warmth and some kind of companionship. A few desperate trysts and a night of frantic sex with men encountered in both muggle and wizarding gay bars from time to time, captivating their senses with his voice, eyes and feline motions, hair tumbling over his shoulders in soft waves, wearing mysterious black…and then, at Hogwarts, reverting to what was normal to him, the students and the staff, gliding around greasy-haired, his mood nasty and all the more cynical after giving and receiving superficial physical satisfaction, if satisfaction it was. Such furtive and empty pleasure turned sour, reinforcing the notion that he could never be loved. But then, who could possibly love someone like him? He made sure to be cruel and keep everyone at a distance. It was better to rot behind a secure iron wall than to be hurt repeatedly. He could hardly feel anymore.

Harry had accused him of lacking feeling and a heart. Fuming, Severus got up and removed his cloak. What did he care for the words and silly insincere apologies of a snotty brat like Potter? It was bad enough that he was James Potter's son. A loud yell startled him, penetrating through all the closed doors. It sounded quite demented.

"NOOO!"

Severus stood up hastily and marched towards Harry's bedroom, from where the cry had issued. The door was ajar. He pushed it wider, sneering at the presents and letters on Harry's bed. One of

them, a bag containing turquoise pastilles, was open. There was a scuffling and moaning sound coming from the adjoining bathroom.

"Potter? What are you caterwauling about?" Severus called, irritated, knocking on the door. He was answered by an alarmed shout:

"DON'T COME IN!"

"I have no intentions of doing so. However, I demand an explanation for disturbing the peace of my rooms," Severus barked, his temper rising. After half a minute, the door opened to reveal Harry wrapped in a housecoat. He was looking rather ill. Severus raised an eyebrow, black eyes travelling languidly over Harry's body.

"Fascinating outfit, Potter. I am waiting for that explanation."

Harry stared at him, lower lip quivering with obvious despair.

"I…uh…got a gift from Fred and George…"

"Ah. The Weasley twins."

"They sent me a bag of pastilles…"

"I am not surprised."

"…and told me to distribute it around. They also added that I should try one myself. And…er…"

Harry went cranberry crimson, fidgeting from one bare foot to the other.

"What did that pastille do, Potter?" Severus asked with ominous calm, eyes narrowing.

"It…It…I am turquoise…down there!" he whispered.

Severus's mouth underwent an odd twitching spasm for a second or two.

"Are you referring to your pubic area?"

Harry's blush intensified and he nodded.

"I am sure it will wear off soon," Severus said, sounding bored.

"It won't! They wrote that the effect would wear off alone, and that it would take two weeks! That's not soon!"

Severus managed to remain completely deadpan.

"Mr Potter, your foolishness and childishness shock me beyond description. Knowing the Weasley twins-"

"But they're my friends, I trust them! I knew that something funny would happen, but I didn't think it would be like this. I'm…I don't want to stay turquoise down there."

He tugged at his housecoat.

"Curiosity killed the cat," Severus quipped smartly, "as for 'down there'…your pudic, to say nothing of pubic, tendencies, are frankly quite deplorable. Surely you know the vocabulary pertaining to the human anatomy? You are behaving like a simpering clueless idiot. In addition, you should never touch or ingest anything if you don't know what it does to you, foolish Gryffindor!"

"I won't have you calling me names! I am your husband, whether you want it or not!" Harry said furiously.

Severus drummed his slender fingers against the doorframe, clearly enjoying Harry's discomfort.

"True. You are married to a Potions Master, and it is, most regretfully, your birthday today. Maybe a hair-colour restorer will solve your… problem, Potter."

"You know that it is my birthday today? I thought you had forgotten."

"Did you actually have the audacity to expect a gift from your abusive spouse, my beloved husband?"

"You're the last person I'd expect anything from," Harry spat. "I'm trying to work on our relationship, and you're doing all to break it."

"In that case, I am sure you will manage without a restorer. Potter darling, can you break something that is already broken? This marriage is purely a convenient tool."

"One can repair something that has been broken, and that requires work. On both sides," Harry retorted.

Severus began to laugh tauntingly.

"Potter, I am amazed at your optimism. Truly amazed. Do you think the divorce forms serve a decorative purpose? I agreed to marrying and bonding with you more for the Headmaster's sake than for yours."

He strode from Harry's room and returned to his bedroom. He was about to remove his robes when the door to his bedroom banged open to reveal Harry, now dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

Severus stared at him without moving.

"I told you that you would be very sorry if you entered my bedroom. Especially without knocking, or without my permission."

"And I refuse to be treated like garbage. Let's talk about our relationship in plain language, Severus."

"Get out of my bedroom immediately," Severus whispered, stepping towards Harry. Harry didn't move. His green eyes were blazing.

"I told you that I am your husband, not a student you can bully."

With a sudden movement, Severus grabbed Harry's wrists and pressed him against the wall, digging his fingers into Harry's skin, his

body crushing Harry's.

"Fine. Let us get this straight, husband of mine. You are garbage. Happy birthday."

He released Harry.

"Now get out before I am forced to resort to violence."

"You already resorted to violence. Manhandling your husband. How pathetic," Harry said softly, making no sign of leaving the room.

Severus's black eyes flashed. He strode towards Harry, who drew out his wand.

"Oh. So you want to duel with me, Potter?"

He drew out his wand and, without delay, used a non-verbal spell on his opponent. Harry gasped as he was blasted off his feet and flung backwards. The last thing he saw was the sneer on Severus's face as he fell, smashing his elbow on the hard parquet floor and cutting his head against the corner of a cupboard.

"Get up and fight, Potter!" Severus snarled.

Harry did not respond. His face was horribly white and blood was starting to make his black hair glisten. It ran down his face. His left arm was hanging at an odd angle.

Severus, too, was deathly pale. He threw his wand onto the bed and knelt down next to Harry.

Sick with guilt, he stared down at the young man. Forgetting all about levitating him by magic or using Floo powder, he manoeuvred Harry's limp body into his arms and went to the hospital wing. He was immediately received by Madam Pomfrey.

"What has he done to himself now?" she asked disapprovingly as Severus silently placed Harry on a bed nearby.

"He fell and broke his arm," Severus answered evasively. Madam Pomfrey looked from him to Harry, and although Severus's face was impassive, she became suspicious at once.

"I am calling the Headmaster," she said. Severus did not say anything. It was not long before Dumbledore whisked into the hospital wing. His blue eyes seemed to x-ray Severus.

"What happened?" he asked crisply.

"We had an argument and it escalated. We drew wands and my spell was a bit strong, I suppose. He fell and broke his arm."

"He also seems to have cut his head," Dumbledore added, the warmth gone from his voice. "Severus, my patience is over. In fact, you are doing what Voldemort has asked you to do. Both you and Harry grew up unloved and unwanted. I was hoping that you would understand him. But sometimes, the abused become abusers themselves. And that is what you have become, Severus."

"He provoked me. He barged into my bedroom, thus disregarding my wishes that he stay away certain rooms. He said that he wanted to talk to me in, I quote, 'plain language'. I had no desire to do so. He insisted."

"Did you have an argument before the fight in your bedroom?" Dumbledore asked shrewdly.

Severus shrugged.

"Yes. He distracted me because of some foolish trick those Weasley twins had played on him. We discussed. He was of the opinion that he is being treated unfairly by me and that we should, ah, repair and work on our…relationship."

Dumbledore was very angry. His blue eyes were dangerous behind his spectacles.

"Severus, feel free to go ahead with the divorce and end the blood protection. It was my mistake. I should never have insisted on this marriage, and I should have known that it would come to this. However, I suggest that the divorce is executed with absolute secrecy and that neither the Ministry nor Voldemort learn of it. You have, of course, not told Voldemort that you and Harry are bonded. If you divorce, it will not matter anymore. You have to maintain the farce, however, or Voldemort will know that you are working against him."

"Headmaster-"

"Good night, Severus."

Harry woke up with his cut and arm healed. It was morning. He reached for his glasses and sat up. Madam Pomfrey went over to his bed, checking him.

"How are you feeling?" she wanted to know.

Harry flexed his arm.

"I'm fine, thank you," he said.

"You'll have breakfast here and then you may go back. And do try to take care of yourself for a change, will you?"

He gave her a small grin.

"I'll try."

Madam Pomfrey was fond of Harry. Besides being good-natured and brave, he was an uncomplicated and cooperative patient. She made sure that he was steady on his feet as he got up to use the toilet and was not happy until he was in bed with a breakfast tray on his knees. Harry ate glumly. His marriage was on the rocks. Severus did not want to communicate with him. He, Harry, had been a fool. Too much was broken between them. He had just put the tray aside when

Dumbledore walked gracefully into the ward and pulled up a chair to his beside.

"Good morning, my dear boy."

"Professor Dumbledore?" Harry asked, astonished.

"In the flesh. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. It's just…I don't know what to do about my marriage," he said softly, toying with the seam of the bed sheet, "I think Severus hates me too much."

"I have suggested to Severus that you divorce and keep it secret from everyone, except for your friends."

"I tried to work on it, sir. I tried talking to him. Asking him questions, making him discuss our conflict and find a solution. He refused. He mocked me."

Dumbledore sighed.

"I am sorry your eighteenth birthday had to end like this. Severus is so difficult sometimes."

Mixed emotions welled up at the word "birthday". Harry remembered that Dumbledore was a Legilimens and hastily tried not to think of his turquoise reminder.

"Maybe divorce is the only way out," he agreed.

The door of the ward opened. Severus Snape looked from one wizard to the other with wary black eyes.

Dumbledore pressed Harry's shoulder gently before leaving Severus and Harry alone together.

Chapter 8

CHAPTER 8

There was a very awkward silence in the hospital room.

"I apologise for landing you in the hospital wing, Potter," Severus said finally. Harry stared at him. Severus was not surprised. The young man probably hated and mistrusted him more than ever. He sat down on the chair Dumbledore had occupied a minute ago, staring at his husband. Their marriage had started off badly and had gone downhill dramatically. Harry was silent, not speaking. It was disconcerting. A divorce sounded perfectly reasonable. It was something which was done frequently as of today and mostly the best solution in matters where conflicts could not be settled. But his union with Harry was no ordinary marriage. In the end, it was Harry's eyes which helped him make up his mind. Their shape and startling green colour reminded him of his mother Lily. Lily, who had always been kind and had defended him when James Potter and Sirius Black had humiliated him. And he had lashed out at her. She was on a different plane of existence now, and he didn't know whether she was in this world or in another. He knew that she was somewhere, her soul ever-living, and that she had moved on, not becoming a ghost like the Bloody Baron, the Grey Lady and others. She had moved on into the Light, gone on to the "next great adventure", as Dumbledore called it, and yet she was still here, and she was in the eyes and soul of her son. Lily had defended Severus, and he had repaid her poorly by joining Voldemort, who had killed her and her husband. Severus's whole being had turned in revolt at the notion of Voldemort trying to murder a baby. He had become disillusioned and dismayed on realising what a circle of serial killers he had joined. And the baby had had to be Harry Potter, who looked so much like James Potter…except for those eyes. Severus looked into the green eyes.

"We will continue our marriage," Severus said, "with your consent. You have mine."

Harry blinked. He had been sure that Severus would happily fetch the divorce papers.

"I consent if you treat me with more respect than you have so far. I am not saying that you should like me. It is enough for me if you realise that I am a sentient thinking being, though I may be inferior in brainpower and talent to you."

Severus was silent, still staring into Harry's eyes broodingly.

"It should suffice to sustain us for a year," he answered.

After Harry's return from the hospital wing, they were usually completely silent around each other, treating each other with indifference. Harry expected to be glad about no longer being the main target of Severus's bad temper. Instead, he began to stifle in the loneliness. Severus and he lived in two separate worlds. Harry kept to his room or went out to fly on his broom or work in the library. Hagrid was spending a few weeks with Olympe Maxime in France, and Harry missed him. He grew bored. He had argued and quarrelled violently with Severus before ending up in the hospital wing and been unhappy. Now he was just as unhappy with his isolation, partly self-imposed, partly brought on by Severus's cold attitude.

He wrote a lot to his friends and read their letters several times, saving up all of them. He insisted to himself that he was content; and then he would recall that he and Severus were married and that Severus was his Protector. The man had had to sleep with him to fulfil the bonding ritual. Their intimacy had been as forced as their distance from each other was. Harry felt that he could not be himself or behave naturally in Severus's presence, and it was probably the same vice versa. At last, he found a confidante in Nessa. Nessa would obligingly uncoil herself from her pestle and converse with him. Harry found himself talking to her about his marriage a lot. He

did not mention his marriage in his letters to his friends except in very brief terms. In his letters, his marriage was "fine" or "quite okay". Nessa soon knew better.

"Severus is just waiting for the day we divorce, Nessa. But he is my Protector besides my husband, and I want to know him better. I don't know how to reach out to him. I am at my wits' end. We live and eat and breathe separately. It's like suffocating, and it's as bad as the arguments in its own way."

"Your husband has been suffocating for years, Harry Potter. He no longer knows what it is to feel. He is half-dead in his heart. He is too used to suffering. Don't become like him otherwise you will wake up and no longer know how to smile or how to appreciate a small but sublime moment. He is in a chasm. Climb down to him, and he will pull you down with him. He has to climb out on his own, brave one, and look for you."

"He will never do that. Not without guidance, and he hates guidance."

"You have tried, young one, and he broke your arm and cut your head. I saw him carry you out past my portrait. I heard you and him arguing inside. And now I feel the distance between you. There is always a way, Harry Potter, and one day, both you and he will find it and take it together. Go out for a walk. Enjoy the rain, enjoy the sun, enjoy whatever is outside. Taste the sweetness the world has to offer and bring it back with you into the rooms you and the Potions Master share."

Nessa's words gave Harry both hope and a strange sadness.

"You speak poetically, Nessa…"

"Ah, poetry is beautiful, young one. Poetry is not only in words. You have to experience it in your own way. Tell me, what do you like to do in your free time?"

"Uhm…I like to read, I love going on my broom for rides, listening to music, writing to my friends, sketching a bit-"

"Sketching? I believe that there will be a sketching and art class next term, young one. I was wandering through the portraits at night and heard the news."

"You think I should participate? I don't know…I sketch really weird stuff…"

"So much the better. Weird is good," Nessa said, yielding to a hissing chuckle. "Your emotions swim at the tip of your tongue, young one. It is the complete opposite with your husband's feelings. He doesn't like to talk at all. Perhaps it is not through speaking that you will find a way to each other, but through something else." She winked at him with her beady eye. The door suddenly opened. Nessa wrapped herself around the pestle and Harry leapt back to avoid being knocked down as Severus stepped out. The door closed behind him.

"Still there?" Nessa asked humorously.

"Yes," Harry said.

"Incorrigible. Showing off your Parselmouth skills, Potter," Severus snarled, brushing past Harry.

"That's what I mean," Harry muttered to Nessa. Severus stopped and slowly turned on his heel.

"What did you just say, Potter?"

A loud hiss from Nessa startled them both. The serpent had opened her mouth and was displaying her fangs, her beady eyes glaring at Severus. It was a warning.

Severus's eyes narrowed to slits.

"You wilful reptile! You have the impudence to disobey the one whose rooms you guard?"

Nessa turned her head towards Harry.

"Tell him that they are not only his rooms but yours as well."

Harry looked into Severus's eyes and repeated Nessa's words:

"Nessa says that they are not only your rooms but mine as well."

"You will hold your forked tongue and continue doing your duty, or I will replace your portrait," Severus threatened.

Nessa hissed out an answer. Harry translated it.

"She says that she will tell all the other pictures about your behaviour and make sure they don't do your bidding."

Severus stared at the serpent for a few moments. Then he marched away, shoulders stiff with anger. Harry stared after him.

"Thank you, Nessa. How do you communicate with him if he doesn't understand Parseltongue?" Harry wondered.

"Oh, I can write with my tail." She waved the tip of her tail at him. "Parseltongue is a purely oral language. I use English as a written language. The one who painted me was very skilled. He poured his art and spirit into me and gave me all he had before he died. I never knew his name. Go out into the sunshine, Harry Potter."

The wise snake closed her eyes, ending the conversation. Harry smiled and followed her recommendation, strolling around in the grounds and drinking in the sunshine. He felt refreshed after his stroll, just like he did after flying on his broom. He reluctantly returned to his rooms. Severus was sitting near the hearth, reading. Harry silently went to his bedroom, leaving the door ajar for the admittance of fresh air, although he could have used a charm to drive out the stuffiness. Hedwig had placed two notes and a

timetable on his pillow. One note was from Kingsley Shacklebolt, telling him that he was coming to Hogwarts on Monday to give Harry Duelling lessons and that he was looking forward to the occasion. The second note contained information for his training for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position and was signed by McGonagall and Moody. The timetable listed his Duelling and training lessons. Smiling, Harry first used a charm to make a copy before uttering a non-verbal spell in his mind and flicking his wand. The timetable stuck itself to the wall. He picked up the copy. Although Severus was completely disinterested in what he, Harry, did, Harry felt that Severus should know. He ventured over to the hearth.

"Er…Severus?" he asked tentatively.

Irritated black eyes surveyed him from behind an ancient tome.

"I just received my timetable for my Duelling and Defense Against the Dark Arts training. I thought I'd give you a copy that way you know where I am."

A slender hand took the timetable without comment. Harry stood around hesitantly.

"Anything else, Potter? Because I am going to a muggle bar for a drink. Alone. I am not interested in your company."

"A muggle bar?"

"To avoid being recognised. Just imagine if the Ministry or a spy of the Dark Lord saw me in a bar. They would think my marriage is disintegrating, and we don't want them to think that."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, feeling a certain disquiet.

"I am interested in other company than yours."

Harry looked at him suspiciously.

"Are you dating someone?" he asked slowly.

"Are you going to indulge in a scene of jealousy?"

Harry's hackles were rising.

"If you are seeing someone behind my back-"

Severus rose, his black eyes boring into Harry's.

"This marriage, Potter, is only a convenient plot. I have no commitment whatsoever where you are concerned except that I am your Protector."

"Are you sleeping with someone else on the side?" Harry asked baldly.

"Rest reassured that I am not sleeping with anyone at the moment and have not done so since I stepped into this wretched union with you. Having a drink in a bar and sleeping with someone are two quite different things, but I do not expect you to understand the distinction with your limited brain capacity."

"But you have nothing against infidelity in this marriage with me, is that right?" Harry asked angrily.

Severus shrugged.

"Our lives are separate, Potter."

"Listen to me, Severus. You had the opportunity to divorce me. Merlin knows why you didn't go running for the divorce forms when I was in the hospital wing. I would have consented. You announced your decision first, not me. Nothing has changed since our last argument. Nothing. If you have such little self-respect, then how can you respect others? You feel no guilt going to a bar and having a drink and flirting with strangers while I am back here at Hogwarts? How can I trust you? And how can you trust me? What is the sense of marriage and responsibility if you behave like this?"

He was not conscious of the tears filling his eyes.

"You and I share a blood bond and you go and…Forget it. I see that you hate me too fixedly and that you have no wish to really know me or to talk to me or to…"

His anger choked him for an instant.

"You see what you want to see. You don't know me at all. Go! If you think that the protection lies only in the blood, then leave! Step out of this fucking marriage! Don't let me pin you down! I would have thought it natural to long to be on talking terms with someone who has saved my life, agreed to marry me and establish a protective blood bond with me! But if you consider it so abnormal, then why should you still disagree to a divorce? Why stick with me if it is more for Dumbledore's sake than for mine?"

He stepped back, covering his face with his hands for a moment. Then he pulled off his wedding band and flung it defiantly at Severus.

"Use it as a Potions ingredient!" he shouted. Severus had become very pale and had not moved or even attempted to speak during Harry's outburst. He flinched slightly as he heard the crashing slam of Harry's bedroom door. Within ten minutes, however, Harry had emerged, his trunk gliding behind him.

"Where are you going?"

Harry did not answer. He headed for the room.

Severus followed him and gripped his shoulder. Harry rounded on him.

"What are you going to do? Break my arm?" he snarled, sounding uncannily like Severus himself. He shook off Severus's hand and marched out of the room. Nessa opened her eyes.

"Harry Potter, don't leave," she called him, but he didn't pay attention. Breathing through clenched teeth, he left the dungeons and finally arrived at Gryffindor Tower.

" *De Amicitia* ," he panted.

"Are you feeling well, dear?" the Fat Lady asked anxiously.

"I…Yeah, I'm fine, thanks. May I go inside?"

"Of course, dear."

Harry climbed into the Gryffindor common room. He went over to the sofa he had always shared with Ron and Hermione. He buried his face in his arms and cried, so immersed in his unhappiness that he did not notice the door open a second time. Severus Snape walked hesitantly inside the room, his black eyes locating Harry on the sofa and his trunk lying in the middle of the room.

Chapter 9

CHAPTER 9

"Potter."

Harry looked up with a start, wiping at his face.

"How did you-?"

"I followed you. You will kindly return to the dungeons with me."

"I shall do no such thing!" Harry shouted.

"I really must insist," Severus said.

"And I really must resist," Harry retorted.

"We are going back."

Harry's tear-stained face was stubborn.

"No, we will not!"

With a spell, Severus made Harry's trunk rise from the floor. Then, before Harry could move or speak in protest, he scooped up his husband and proceeded to carry him out of the room.

"SEVERUS SNAPE! PUT ME DOWN IMMEDIATELY!" Harry yelled at the top of his voice, struggling and trying to hold on to Severus at the same time.

"You are being shockingly recalcitrant."

"ANYONE WOULD BE RECALCITRANT IF THEY WERE MARRIED TO YOU!"

"Potter, please don't scream in my ear or I shall be forced to cast a Silencing Spell on you."

"I WANT THAT DIVORCE!"

"I do not want the divorce."

Harry was so shocked that he fell silent before renewing his struggling and shouting.

"I STILL WANT A DIVORCE!"

The portraits on the walls looked on interestedly. Some of their subjects even left their frames and followed the couple by jumping from picture to picture. Severus sighed and shifted Harry in his arms.

"You are truly deafening me, Potter. One more loud sound, and I will use that Silencing Spell on you. You're heavy, by the way."

"Then why don't you put me down? My overwhelming weight is a perfectly valid reason, even for you," Harry snapped.

"I shall not," Severus growled. Harry sighed and resignedly held on to Severus, who carried him all the way down to the dungeons in stony silence.

"We have reached our rooms."

"Our rooms? *Our* rooms? This is world-breaking news to me!" Harry exclaimed with a sneer worthy of Severus, "and do you think I am so stupid as to not know where I am?"

Nessa the serpent eagerly stretched out her head as the two wizards approached. She took one look at them and uttered her characteristic staccato chuckle.

Severus tersely said the password and she let them pass. Severus at last set Harry down on his feet and, with a directing flick of his wand, sent the trunk to Harry's bedroom.

"Did you bring me back so you can have me sign the divorce forms immediately?" Harry spat.

"I told you that I do not want a divorce."

"I want one. And I want it NOW!"

Severus studied Harry's face calmly. Then he extracted Harry's wedding band from his pocket, took Harry's left hand and slid the ring over his finger.

"I am not very good with constructive relationships of any kind, Po – Harry."

Harry's eyebrows shot up at Severus's use of his first name.

"Yeah, well, I noticed that," he said rudely, "you're wonderful when it comes to destructive relationships."

Then he realised that Severus was trying to apologise and how much effort it was probably costing him. Harry took a deep calming breath.

"Okay. So why don't you want a divorce?" he asked.

"Po – Harry, we both have one enemy in common. It makes sense that we defeat him together and that you have blood protection."

"Ah. Well, political reasons are always strong ones to keep a marriage going," Harry remarked acidly. "Anyway, I don't want to delay your trip to that bar."

He yanked his hand out of Severus's.

"And I don't see why I should stay down over here. I'll talk to Professor Dumbledore and ask him whether I can move out altogether."

"You are my husband! You will not live anywhere else!" Severus said, his anger mounting.

"You will not do this, you will not do that! Is that all you have to say to me? How promising for our relationship! And see what happens. We just have to open our mouths to speak and we're already arguing. You are a bully, Severus Snape, and I'll wear this damned wedding ring for the sake of defeating our common enemy, as you put it. And what difference does it make where I live? I live separately from you anyway! We don't share a room or a bed or any sympathy, for that matter. Look, I'm tired of discussing with you. I know that you'll be flinging insults at me any moment, so I'm going back to my room and I'll keep out of your way like I've been doing since my stay in the hospital wing. You hate me, and you'll only smile once you read my obituary."

He marched off to his bedroom, leaving his husband standing in the room, hands hanging limply by his sides – only to stop in front of the door. He sighed and turned back. Severus had not changed his position. Harry walked towards him.

"Sorry," Harry said, his anger evaporating. He suddenly felt for the man who was cloistered away in his solitude. He felt for him like he had on seeing that fateful memory of his father and Sirius bullying Severus in the Pensieve.

"Can we sit down and, uh, talk this over a bit?" he asked Severus awkwardly.

Severus studied his face with an unreadable expression before going to the sofa near the hearth and sitting down. Harry occupied the chair opposite Severus, who gestured with an elegant hand.

"Talk," he said curtly.

"Well, if we're going to live together, then we ought to interact."

Severus's eyes narrowed, and Harry continued hastily:

"I mean…we could sort of meet up in the evenings and…just talk about what we did. Or if you don't like to talk, maybe we could do something which doesn't involve too much talking…I could help you with slicing up Potions ingredients or something…"

"You? Help me slice up Potions ingredients?" Severus said incredulously. Harry went red and opened his mouth to argue, but Severus, noticing the danger signs, added smoothly:

"Maybe you could indeed make yourself useful. I do prefer working alone, however."

"You prefer doing *everything* alone," Harry said. "What about going out for a drink together?"

"Potter, I am not fond of socialising."

"Is it so unnatural that I should want to interact with someone who just happens to have saved my life and who just happens to be my husband and Protector? I asked you that question once before. Severus, I…I can't expect you to want to know me, but I want to know you."

"Potter…Harry. You already know me and have done so for quite a number of years."

"Do I *really* know you? I've known you as a teacher. And I know that you have a, uh, complex temper, but I don't know what your, uh, favourite food is, or favourite Potion, favourite book, favourite music, whether you collect stamps…you know, things like that."

"Collect stamps?" Severus asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, I forgot that wizarding people don't use stamps…once long ago, Ron sent me a letter and the envelope was covered with stamps, the Dursleys were really hacked off. It was rather funny, actually…" he trailed away, realising that he was starting to babble in order to cover his nervousness.

There was a tense pause.

"So what do you think if we have some kind of regular interactional meeting?"

Severus stared impassively at his husband, who looked back at him with an expectant spark in his green eyes.

"And please don't say that you'll think about it. It's a sign of procrastination," Harry added seriously.

Another pause.

"I know that it sounds a bit weird, but it's not like we've never, er, interacted before."

"I quite remember our….interaction, as you put it. As you yourself have pointed out correctly: that type of interaction was forced."

"So I guess we've got to give ourselves a bit of a push to get into a more or less verbal type of interaction," Harry persisted. "I mean, we're talking now, aren't we?"

"Considering that you are doing the major part of the talking…I suppose you could say so."

Harry tried hard not to stand up and walk away in complete resignation.

"Let's meet up once or twice a week in the evening and just… exchange news or do something together. You are a very organised and scheduled person, and we could fix the dates and times-"

"Potter, you are starting to babble."

"I…" Harry's voice became unsteady. His nose was still slightly stuffy from crying. He stared at his feet for a few seconds. Then he rose.

"Give me five seconds."

Severus shrugged nonchalantly and picked up a book which was lying on the table.

Harry went to the shelf where the flask containing their bonding blood was. He grabbed it and stamped up to the sofa, sitting next to Severus. To his surprise, Severus shut his book and took the flask. Looking into Harry's desperate eyes, he murmured the bonding words which the witch had recited to them during the ceremony:

"'My joys will be yours, as your joys will be mine. My sorrows will be yours, as your sorrows will be mine. I am your Protector, and my blood will merge with yours.' Tell me, Harry. What joys have I to share with you, or you with me? Would you ever want…" here his satiny soft voice became harsh and hoarse, "…the sorrows of Severus Snape to become yours? After our most romantic consummation, Potter, can you imagine what the emotional exchange would be like? Can you imagine it?" He shouted out the last sentence, his knuckles whitening as he squeezed the flask. Harry reacted with complete calm. He gently wrapped his hand around Severus's so that they were holding the flask together.

"You have too little faith in me, Severus. I know what sorrow and pain are. Give me a chance to prove what I am saying. We don't have to exchange strong emotions all the time. I just want to do things together with you, if you're willing. I want to know you."

"Do you know what you are asking for?" Severus whispered.

Harry looked into his eyes and smiled a little.

"Not completely. But I want to find out."

"On your head be it, rash Gryffindor. And wipe that childish smirk off your face."

His tapering fingers relaxed around the flask, and it slid into Harry's grip.

"It binds us together on a level which transcends the symbolic border," Harry said, choosing his words slowly and carefully.

Severus sneered slightly.

"That may be the case, Potter, but I will tell you this: you and I will never bond together spiritually or emotionally."

"Never say never," Harry answered undauntedly. Severus snorted and got up from the sofa.

"Have we finished our most enlightening discourse?"

"Just one more thing. When do we meet up for, uh, interacting sessions?"

Severus eyed him scornfully.

"I guess it is sort of unnatural, but when we get used to it it'll become more natural and we won't have to follow, er, fixed times and stuff."

"Potter, I am not at all surprised that Professor Trelawney was so shocked at your Divination skills."

"Look, why the hell did you carry me back all the way here and refuse a divorce if you are so pessimistic about our relationship?" Harry said tiredly.

"Were you not paying attention? The chances that we can defeat Voldemort if you possess blood protection are better," Severus spat.

He grabbed the flask containing their blood and whisked past Harry. Harry returned to his room, downcast. He felt that nothing fruitful had come of their discussion and that they would continue living separate lives.

He ripped the wedding ring off his finger.

"You're too good for a wretched union like this one," he said to it, "you should have been given with love. Instead, you were given with hate."

Nessa noticed Harry's glum mood the next evening.

"He doesn't want to know me, Nessa," Harry said unhappily. "I think I'll just leave the dungeons for good."

Nessa unwound herself with such force from the pestle that the Potions tool rocked.

"Don't!" she hissed.

"I'll stay married to him, Nessa. But why did he carry me back, as you saw, and then make it clear to me that he would never connect with me emotionally or spiritually? Nessa, I don't want a repetition of the time when I grew up without warmth. I can't…" he choked back a sob. "My friends are not here anymore. I can only get to them via owl post. Even Dobby can't be his usual self when he comes to our – I mean, Severus's rooms. I don't appreciate being buried alive and have only a few training lessons and broom rides to look forward to until the students come back, and that's still a couple of weeks away."

"He will be very angry, Harry Potter."

"I don't care. Someone has to stand up to him. The next time I return it will be because I want to, without being carried away like a sack of potatoes."

Nessa laid her head upon a coil of her body, gazing at him sympathetically.

"Come down and visit me from time to time," she said softly. Harry smiled and nodded.

When he was sure that Severus had retired to bed, he and his trunk – which he still hadn't unpacked except to get fresh clothes – glided out of the dungeons to Gryffindor Tower. The wedding ring was in his pocket.

"What! Back again, dear?" the Fat Lady exclaimed.

"Yes," Harry said wearily. He went up to his old dormitory, now reserved for the next batch of Gryffindors. He removed his shoes and lay down on his faithful four-poster bed, trying very hard not to think how Severus would react once he found out that Harry had forsaken the dungeons for the second time.

Chapter 10

CHAPTER 10

In spite of the havoc in his marriage and the emotional turmoil – or precisely because of them – Harry slept like a log, tucked away peacefully. He woke up early in the morning with the realisation that it could not go on like this and that running away was not a good solution – least of all for a Gryffindor. But of what importance were House values in a situation where Voldemort was spreading such terror? And he refused to return to the dungeons where he was not wanted. With a sigh, he got out of bed, showered and changed. He glanced at his trunk and grinned. If the trunk would speak, it would probably give him a sound tongue-lashing for rushing up and down between the dungeons and Gryffindor Tower. Dobby brought him breakfast. Harry noticed that the things on the breakfast tray were rattling due to the elf's trembling hands.

"Dobby? What happened?"

"Harry Potter, Master Snape is very angry. Dobby found him flinging bottles and a cauldron against the wall when Dobby came to clear the breakfast things!" he squeaked.

"Poor wall. He didn't hurt or threaten you, did he, Dobby?"

Dobby shook his head.

"No, but he gives Dobby such a look…" Dobby shivered.

"I'm sorry about that, Dobby. It's actually my fault…"

While he ate, Harry mused about the future. He could not stay forever in Gryffindor Tower – the students would soon come to Hogwarts. He would have to ask Dumbledore for separate rooms and hope he did not sound spoilt or something. If being forced together promoted hostility instead of reducing it, then it seemed the

best solution. A divorce would end his blood protection – and thus sever an efficient avenue of defense against Voldemort. He pulled out the Marauder's Map after brushing his teeth and scanned it. The dot labelled "Severus Snape" was pacing up and down in the dungeons. As he watched, it stopped pacing and headed for the exit. To Harry's consternation, the dot moved up several flights of stairs, disappearing from time to time as it took a shortcut through a tapestry.

"Crap," he whispered: the dot had reached the seventh floor; its destination was only too clear.

"He's going to kill me." His fingers left moist traces on the piece of parchment.

"Scared of Severus Snape after battling dragons and Voldemort? Boy, Harry," he said to himself, trying to make himself grin. It didn't work at all. The dot was moving towards Gryffindor Tower. Harry cleared the Map and stuffed it into his trunk. He quickly slid his wedding ring over his finger in case Severus misinterpreted its absence as another plea for divorce. He was wondering whether he should sit or stand when the door fairly burst open, revealing an irate Severus Snape. His face was bleached with fury and his body rigid. A muscle was jumping in his jaw. Harry involuntarily took a step backwards. He had never seen Severus so angry before, not even after Sirius's escape on Buckbeak or after the mortifying Pensieve incident.

"So," Severus hissed. He took a step towards Harry.

"Harry Potter was not treated like royalty, therefore he decided to flee. And they call you brave…"

Harry did not dare to speak, gazing back steadily at Severus instead.

Severus strode over to him and stared into his face.

"I am protecting your ungrateful ass," he spat.

"THEN TALK TO ME IF YOU TAKE YOUR DUTY AS MY PROTECTOR SO SERIOUSLY!" Harry shouted.

"Don't. Raise. Your. Voice," Severus breathed, grabbing Harry's arm and flinging him onto a sofa. Harry landed on his back. Severus stooped over him.

"Get up."

"You will not give me orders!" Harry answered.

"GET UP!" Severus roared.

"NO!"

"I am not a patient or a nice man, Potter," Severus said, his black eyes flashing, "nor am I fond of tantrums thrown by spoilt coddled heroes."

"I WAS NEVER SPOILT! YOU SAW INTO MY MIND DURING THE OCCLUMENCY LESSONS!" Harry yelled. He took a deep breath.

"If you stop seeing what you *want* to see, then I'll return to the dungeons with you."

"I see a pampered brat-"

"Stop it. STOP IT, SEVERUS! JUST STOP IT!" Harry shouted, leaping from the sofa and running at Severus, who seized his shoulders and thrust him away; Harry, however, kept straining at him.

"Do you know what I see in you? I see a man who is drowning in his self-erected walls-"

"Shut up, Potter," Severus snarled.

"-because he is shutting everyone out, including his own husband!" Harry finished, tears of anger and frustration sparkling in his green

eyes, spectacles askew.

"You are talking nonsense-"

"Look at me. At me – Harry! I am not James Potter. You hated him and you still despise his memory. But please understand me, Severus, he was my father, he's different to me than to you, and I accept that he was flawed like we all are. Severus, can't we start anew? We can't Obliviate all the years behind us. But we can put them aside. And…I owe you an apology for breaking into the Pensieve behind your back. I'd find it hard to trust me if I were you. But please give me another chance. And a reason why I should reurn to the dungeons with you, if you are so keen on avoiding me in our…your…whatever…rooms."

Severus released Harry's shoulders and slowly sat down on the sofa. Harry occupied the space next to him. Severus gazed around the common room.

"You are extremely persistent, Harry Potter," he said finally.

"How do you mean?"

The black eyes looked into his.

"You knew that I would come here again and return to our quarters together, didn't you?" Severus stated rather than asked.

"Well…I wasn't sure. But I had to find a way to make you talk to me."

"You should have been Sorted into my House, Potter. I believe you nearly were."

"Yes. I nearly was. So…How do we go on?"

"I suggest that we leave this infernal place."

"You still haven't given me a reason why I should go back with you," Harry pointed out tenaciously, "and I don't want to hear that it's only

because of the protective blood bond."

Severus's eyes narrowed.

"Which reasons do you want to hear?" he asked shortly.

"That you're willing to interact a bit with me. Not treat me as if I were a stranger or parasite. I'm not asking you to, er, like me. It's just…if we're fighting together against Voldemort, then we should work together on some kind of level."

Severus uttered an exasperated sigh.

"Fine. If you are so keen on interaction, then we'll find something which is tolerable for both of us. Will you kindly accompany me back to our rooms?"

Harry nodded and got up. Severus followed his movement, and they left Gryffindor Tower together.

"Black," Severus said suddenly.

Harry shot him a questioning look.

"My favourite colour. Yours is probably red."

"I love red, but I also love green. I can't really make up my mind between the two."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"You see, you've still got to know me," Harry remarked.

Severus snorted. They continued their way back to the dungeons in silence. Nessa opened a glinting eye.

"Ah, he didn't carry you back this time," she greeted Harry. Severus's mouth thinned – he was evidently most displeased at being excluded from the conversation by his own portrait and by his husband.

"No. This time, I managed to talk a bit with him."

" *Monkswood and wolfsbane* ," Severus said loudly.

He swept into the hall before Harry, moving in the direction of the Potions laboratory. The door closed crisply behind him.

Harry shook his head.

"Interaction my ass. You've already shut me out again. You've already reverted to our previous isolation..."

The door suddenly opened, revealing Severus holding a small bottle in his hand.

"For your hair problem," he said with a decidedly smug smirk. Harry's cheeks immediately grew warm.

"There's a colour-changing effect those impossible twins added to those pastilles. I took one back with me to analyse with the aim of creating a specialised potion for the one and only wizarding hero," Severus added in a bored tone.

Harry stared at him. For one thing, he understood why the hair on his nether regions had been going all the colours of the rainbow ever since he had ingested the pastille; but what astonished him far more was that Severus had taken the time and trouble to brew a restorer only for him.

"I…Thank you very much, Severus. I really appreciate that."

Severus toyed with the bottle, eyes gleaming with strange humour.

"What colour has your unmentionable area turned, Potter? I do not want to offend your sensibilities by using the appropriate vocabulary."

"Er, it's gone orange."

Severus's smirk widened and he gave Harry the bottle.

"Drink it now," he ordered, "the slight itching sensation you will feel is perfectly normal."

Harry held it up for a moment to admire the deep dark-blue depths before drinking the liquid. It was pleasantly sweet.

"Thank you," he repeated, giving the bottle back to Severus.

"You *are* married to a Potions Master," Severus remarked rather haughtily.

"And to whom are you married?" Harry wanted to know.

"To a recalcitrant brat," Severus replied. "I am sure you will want to retire to your room and admire the effects of that restorer."

"Oh…Yes, I, uh, guess so," Harry said, flustered.

The gleam of strange, rather malicious humour had still not left his husband's dark eyes.

A few minutes later, Severus Snape's smirk became positively nasty when he heard a furious bellow issue from Harry's room.

"SEVERUS SNAPE! WHY AM I BARE AS A BABY'S BOTTOM DOWN THERE?!"

"It was the only way to solve your problem," Severus called back, closing his bedroom door with a snap and warding it with a locking charm.

Chapter 11

CHAPTER 11

The locking charm on Severus's bedroom door proved unnecessary; Harry obviously remembered what had happened the last time he had been in that room. He preferred fuming in the hall, waiting for Severus. Severus's potion had solved his problem in a radical way which he had never taken into consideration.

"Now, now, Potter, there is no visible damage, is there?" Severus asked him silkily when he found Harry waiting for him in the hall with flashing green eyes.

"You told me that it would restore the original colour!" Harry exclaimed.

"I may have *implied* something of the sort," Severus breathed. "You are too impatient, Potter, which partially explains your appalling Potions-brewing abilities. Things have to be done in steps. You have taken the first one. Now comes the second one."

He held out a bottle with purple liquid.

"This is the actual restorer."

"And why didn't you tell me that it involved two steps?" Harry asked indignantly.

Severus merely raised a sly eyebrow, and one corner of his mouth lifted in mocking smile.

"Drink that," was all he said.

Harry cast him a look of deep distrust.

"How do I know that this won't do something…unexpected to me?"

Severus lowered his eyebrow and raised the other one.

"The Headmaster would be rather displeased if I conducted further experiments on your pubic area."

Harry glared at him and gulped down the contents. It tasted of cough syrup.

"Thanks," he said cautiously.

"Spare me the details of the results," Severus said disdainfully, marching away with the empty receptacle, "but your, ah, tresses should grow back sufficiently to form an ideal nest for a family of birds."

"What?!" Harry was starting to sound slightly hysterical. "Tresses? Birds?!"

"I recommend that you simply drop your pants," Severus said, closing the door behind him. Harry rushed back to his room. His nether regions were itching mightily, worse than when he had fallen an unknowing victim to depilation. Harry pulled down his trousers and underwear for a quick inspection. After what Severus had said about a bird's nest, he had panicked and feared the opposite of a baby's bottom, plagued by visions of bristling hedges.

"Oh, good! Right colour, too."

He hauled up his clothes again with a relieved sigh and went to wash his hands. He wondered whether he should tell Fred and George that Severus Snape, of all people, had managed to find an "antidote" to their pastilles. And that the man had a particularly vindictive sense of humour. Harry discovered that he was smiling.

On Monday, Harry's busy training schedule started. Kingsley Shacklebolt turned out to be an excellent teacher, combining patience and friendliness with a firm and demanding attitude, thus motivating and challenging Harry. Harry also had regular lessons

with Professors McGonagall and Moody, who took turns at instructing him. Now that Harry was busy, he felt more confident, encouraged and less prone to thinking all the time of his unusual marriage. Severus, in the meantime, was involving him to a "minimal extent", as Severus himself put it, in his Potions work and research. The dour wizard treated him with cool detachment, rarely speaking to Harry unless it was to ask him to chop up Potions ingredients (swooping to Harry's table every now and then to make sure that he was cutting them the right way), shelf new books in the library, label Potions jars, stock the ingredients cupboards etc. Harry worked neatly and quietly, very often with Severus brewing some nameless potion or the other. Once, an enormous cloud of bright pink smoke issued from the cauldron, covering everything in a dense clingy fog. Harry's eyes began to tear and he coughed. His knife slipped and he cut his finger.

"Ouch!"

He did not dare dispel the smoke with a charm in case it was part of whatever experiment Severus was conducting. He heard some dark muttering from the thickest point of the smoke cloud, including a few four-letter words. Then the smoke suddenly vanished. Severus marched over to Harry.

"Are you all right?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes, I'm fine. I just cut myself when all that smoke appeared out of nowhere."

"It appeared from the cauldron, Potter," Severus said irritably, taking Harry's hand and studying the cut finger. He extracted his wand and passed it over the cut, murmuring softly in Latin, leaving the skin unblemished.

"Wow! Thank you, Severus," Harry said, smiling at him.

Severus did not respond, walking back to his cauldron instead. Harry resumed his work. It was a bit better than it had been in his days as

a student in Severus's class. They were interacting – but it was still very distant, glazed with ice. Severus did not seem to take a personal interest in Harry or in what he did. Harry was genuinely curious about Severus and his research but was rebuffed on asking Severus questions concerning his person or his work. The short-tempered Slytherin informed him that he was not interested in "boring small-talk" and that he didn't see why Potions would interest Harry, considering his past "abysmal performances" in his classes. Harry was treated more as an under-assistant than as his husband; the important thing was that Severus was superior and Harry inferior. When Severus had first told Harry that he could help him with his work, Harry had been pleased, viewing this has a step forwards in their precarious relationship. Now he realised that Severus was indifferent to him and did not know what to do with him. So why not make use of him? He did live in the rooms over which Severus had presided for years. He was still not welcome to Severus's rooms. His moving-in must have been akin to an invasion in Severus's eyes. His hope that their marriage would improve started to succumb to resignation. Especially when he was away from his lessons with Shacklebolt and Severus's two fellow-teachers, his hopelessness would gnaw at him as he sat in his bedroom or went out on broom rides. The bottom line was that neither he nor Severus was happy with the marriage. Harry longed for the day the Hogwarts students would return, filling the castle with voices and a hundred activities. The lessons, letters from Harry's friends and Harry's conversations with Nessa prevented him from stagnating like a plant which received only the bare minimum of attention and managed to eke out a dull and grey life. Harry just the same admitted to himself that it was better than being with the Dursleys. Nessa soon developed topics for their talks.

"Innocence. Let us talk about innocence today, young one," she said as Harry drew up a chair to her portrait. Severus had sneered at the addition of the chair but not said anything. Nessa coiled herself in front of her pestle.

"You are innocent, young one. I am not acquainted with all the details concerning your husband, but he has a dark past, and he mourns the loss of his innocence. One of the forms of innocence is when you can smile from the heart."

"And he can no longer do that," Harry said, drawing up a knee and embracing it.

"But you can."

"It is so difficult to do that when he is around," Harry confessed with a sigh.

"I am sure the Headmaster was thinking of that aspect when he arranged your marriage," Nessa said.

"It's going to be about two months since we married and nothing much has changed between us," Harry answered. "If he hated me before, then he is indifferent to me now, or he still hates me but is being careful not to let it show too much. I'd really like to know him. He won't let me."

"One day, he will let you," Nessa said.

"You're so optimistic."

"It's one of the things the world lacks," Nessa answered with her hissing staccato laugh.

"Yeah. That's true."

"Innocence and self-confidence are often siblings," Nessa remarked. "The Potions Master is deeply insecure at heart, more than you, young one. He envies you. I saw how he looked at you when you and I last conversed. He cannot talk Parseltongue, for instance. He threw away his innocence on his quest for security, the wrong kind of security, that much I can tell."

"Nessa…Is he beyond all hope? Is it too late for him? Will he always be so bitter about life?"

"Not unless something changes. Not unless he can taste and cherish a drop of innocence."

Harry smiled a little bitterly.

"He took my innocence, you know…"

"Ah. That was only your physical innocence, young one, wasn't it? Tell me, did he take your heart and soul when you fulfilled your bond?"

Harry bit his lip and shook his head. To speak of the experience still caused him pain.

"You see," Nessa said gently, "blood bonds, marriages, consummation and all these intimate types of relationships…If there is no emotional and spiritual exchange, young one, and only so-called political reasons behind them…then they are invalid and null for the soul."

"He doesn't want to divorce me. He seems to think that he owes the Headmaster too much to disappoint him by divorcing me. I'm sorry that I'm wailing to you about my marriage all the time, Nessa."

"Young one, I can see that your marriage is very important to you. You are not wailing to me. You are trying to make it work while he is hiding. There is a spark of optimism somewhere. And don't forget that lots of students will soon be coming to this empty building. You'll see how everything will change. Do you remember that art class? Why don't you sign up for it? You will be with others."

Harry was indeed looking forward to seeing Ginny and Luna, both in their seventh year, again. He also decided to take Nessa's suggestion and sign up for the art class. He did like sketching and drawing. It would give him something creative and expressive to do.

Chapter 12

CHAPTER 12

A/N: Dear all, thank you for all your reviews! I have completely forgotten to respond to questions in your reviews. Please accept my apologies. Also, I may have to update less frequently (1-2 times a week) because I am drowning in my Master's thesis and a mountain of translation work, to say nothing of the new university term which will start next week…The auburn-haired Ravenclaw boy Kevin belongs to me. Okay, now for the answers!

shogi: "De Amicitia" means "On friendship" and is a reference to *Laelius: de amicitia* by Marcus Tullius Cicero. I had to take Latin for seven years in high school and I always liked the title. And no, Severus did not get bare "down there". He learnt about its effects from the experience of others…;-)

Elpin: I'm glad both our Harrys draw. In my first Snarry, Harry learnt to play the piano. In the second one, he learnt sign language and telepathy. So in this fic, I wanted him to learn another art :-) I'll read your Snarry.

Kayla: Loved the naughty review for Chapter 10…

Those who commented on art/drawing becoming important: well observed!

The term had started, and the castle was humming with life. Hagrid had returned from France in an excellent mood; Ginny had greeted Harry with a squashy hug on the day after the Feast and Luna had immediately proceeded to congratulate him dreamily on his marriage to Severus.

"I am sure Potions lessons will be better now that he has married you. He is a rather short-tempered man," Luna remarked with her usual bluntness.

"I am not so sure, Luna," Harry replied briskly. "He tends to keep his private and teaching life very separate."

This, of course, was not at all the true reason for Severus's teaching personality, but he considered his marriage far too private to tell anyone about the true state of affairs between him and Severus. He was, after all, withholding this information even from his best friends. Only Nessa knew.

"What do his rooms look like? Are they really filled with chains and axes?" Ginny asked with a chuckle.

Harry grinned.

"Nah, they're not. They're quite nice, actually. No Slytherin colours… well, except for a Slytherin banner. But the rest is elegant."

"Is he treating you well?"

"Yes," Harry said very shortly. Ginny understood that Harry's marriage was not a welcome topic and quickly changed the subject.

"Have you heard about the new art class?" she asked. "I was wondering whether I should participate, but I really am more interested in Quidditch."

"I just signed up for it on the notice board," Harry replied.

"Oh, I must sign up too!" Luna said, "I have always wanted to draw a Crumpled-horned Snorkack properly."

She glided away with a quill, leaving Harry and Ginny struggling to look as deadpan as possible.

"Harry, if Sn – I mean, your husband is, er, giving you a hard time, send a letter to Mom and Dad, or tell Dumbledore. You look like you've lost weight."

"It's okay, Ginny. Really. Didn't Hermione and Ron tell you?"

"They did, but you don't give much news about your marriage in your letters, do you?"

"It's fine, Ginny, really," Harry said somewhat impatiently, "Severus is okay. He's got no problem with me bringing friends to the dungeons, provided they stay in my bedroom, of course. You and Luna are welcome to visit me anytime."

"Really? How nice!" Luna exclaimed, who had just returned from the notice board.

An auburn-haired Ravenclaw boy approached Ginny, who went a bit pink.

"Oh, hi Kevin," she said, beaming. "I'll see you around, Harry. Take care."

"We'll see each other on Friday evenings for the art class, Harry," Luna said.

"Yeah, I'm looking forward."

Severus raised a disdainful eyebrow when Harry informed him on his whereabouts on Friday evenings.

"I frankly thought that the world of art would be a bit too high for you, Potter," he remarked.

"I stopped being surprised at your thinking processes long ago," Harry retorted coolly. "You think you know everything."

Severus's lip curled as he looked Harry up and down in a condescending manner. Harry had grown steadily, but he was not as

tall as either Ron or Severus. It was therefore easy for Severus to make Harry feel inferior in many ways.

"I would have attributed knowing everything to your know-it-all friend Miss Granger," Severus answered.

"You dislike Hermione because she's brilliant and not a show-off. And because she's muggle-born."

The black eyes narrowed.

"Be careful, Potter."

" *You* had better be careful," Harry hissed. "You can't deny that you never praised Hermione for her potions, and hers were always the best. You never ever gave her any credit."

Severus stepped towards Harry, who stayed where he was.

"Are you trying to tell me how to teach a class, Potter?" he spat.

"No, I'm not doing anything of the sort! I just refuse to have you criticise my friend for no reason at all. And if someone criticised you, I'd defend you, because although you are not interested in me and in what I do, you're still my husband and Protector. I've got to go for my training lessons now."

Harry turned and marched off.

Friday evening arrived; Harry and Luna went together to the classroom and eagerly stepped inside. A black cloak was neatly folded on a chair and a pretty woman of Indian descent was tapping her wand against a large case on the floor. It sprung open, revealing all kinds of drawing material. Workboxes filled with drawing tools were lying neatly on each table.

"Ah, that must be Professor Mukherjee," a student behind Harry and Luna said in an awed voice.

"Her art is being exhibited at the Wizarding Art Gallery in London," someone else whispered.

The witch turned and smiled at them, her blue sari making a rustling sound. Her eyes were as black as Severus's, but they were bright as a bird's. She was about Harry's height.

"Please sit down," she said in a cheerful voice which matched her eyes and smile. A large crowd of students from ranging from fourth to seventh year trooped into the classroom. A scraping of chairs ensued as people sat down.

The witch's keen eyes travelled over them. Harry thought he saw a flicker of recognition as she looked at him.

"I am very happy to see so many of you who have come to attend this class. I feel honoured to teach you the principles and technique of sketching and drawing at this school. My name is Sonia Mukherjee, and instead of simply reading out your names, I think it would be nice if each student introduced himself and herself. Please tell me and your fellow-students what you find interesting about art and what you expect from this course."

She gestured at the student closest to her. Harry, who was sitting right in front with Luna next to him, thought of what he wanted to say – it would be his turn in another thirty seconds. Soon, the witch nodded at him.

"My name is Harry Potter."

Many heads turned in his direction, but Harry was used to this by now, although he disliked it. He continued:

"I actually graduated this summer, but I have to stay at Hogwarts for safety's reason. Erm…I am married to Professor Snape and I assist him in small tasks where his Potions research is concerned. I am training to become a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Uhm, so that's just a little about me. I'm attending this class because I like to

sketch and draw in my free time. I've got a sketchbook, and it helps me express things I can't express in words. I would like to learn more about drawing and mastering various techniques and styles; and I think it would be really helpful to draw with other people and exchange ideas, because I've always kept pretty much to myself about my drawing."

"Thank you, Mr Potter. Feedback and interaction will be as important as discovering and refining your individual style. And, as you mentioned, art is another way of expressing the way you experience your world."

She smiled at him and went on to Luna.

"Great class!" Harry said after it was over.

"Professor Mukherjee is very good," Luna agreed. The other students were equally impressed, talking excitedly about the future lessons.

"Mr Potter? May I please have a word?" Professor Mukherjee called.

"I'll wait for you, Harry," Luna said, trotting away happily. The witch closed the door quietly and looked at Harry. She was young, perhaps four or five years older than Tonks. She wore her black hair in a fashionable bob.

"I am a member of the Order of the Phoenix, Harry," she said without preamble. "I am on familiar terms with the Headmaster well and have spoken with your husband before. I know that you are taking Duelling lessons with King."

"King?"

"That's what everybody calls Kingsley Shacklebolt," she said with a twinkle reminiscent of Dumbledore. She became serious.

"I am aware that you are more than capable of looking after yourself. Albus has told me a lot about you. Have you not wondered why the Order has not asked you to become a member even though a year has passed since you turned seventeen?"

"Yes, I was wondering about that," Harry said slowly. He remembered feeling very resentful and angry when he had turned seventeen and no one had spoken about him joining the Order, especially after what he had been through.

"Now that you are protected by a blood bond and are strengthening your protection by taking training lessons, the Order members think that you are more than mature enough to join them."

Harry nodded. It made sense that he needed some kind of approved practical training to join.

"But then…are you here to protect me or because of the art class?" Harry asked, hoping that he did not sound rude. He liked the witch; she did not talk down to him and seemed to be very good-natured.

Her eyes twinkled again.

"The latter, though I will naturally protect if you should ever be in danger; but seeing that you are married to a powerful wizard and are being trained by three members of the Order under Albus's eye…I would say that you reasonably well protected. I daresay you do get tired of hearing that you have to be protected, though."

"Yeah, I do," Harry admitted.

"It goes both ways – you are protecting us too," she said, adjusting her pallu°. "It was a pleasure meeting you."

They shook hands, and Harry left, agreeably surprised. Luna was making drawing signs in the air when Harry joined her. He thought of going back down to the dungeons to join the dour Potions Master. He didn't appreciate the idea of returning to his solitude.

"Would you like to see my room?" he asked Luna.

"Oh, certainly, Harry!" she beamed. Together, they went down to the dungeons. Nessa the serpent looked sceptically at Luna.

"Nessa, this is my friend Luna," Harry said. Luna looked eager.

"You wouldn't happen to have seen a Crumpled-horned Snorkack, would you?"

Nessa stared at her beadily and shook her head.

"Pity," Luna sighed.

Harry said the password and the portrait opened. Severus Snape was standing in the hall with a book in his hand. He sneered as Harry and Luna came inside.

"Good evening, Professor," Luna said dreamily. Severus gave Harry a look which clearly expressed his opinion of Harry's choice of friends.

"Sir, I wanted to ask you if you had a Crumpled-horned Snorkack among your Potions ingredients."

Severus eyed her contemptuously. Harry desperately wished that he could remain as unruffled as Luna, who hardly even seemed to be aware of Severus's unfriendly gaze.

"I do not harbour any fictitious creatures in my stores," he said crossly.

"You are being rather rude, sir," Luna remarked mistily. "It must be the Nargles."

Harry realised that it was high time to intervene.

"Erm, Luna, my room is this way. And, uh, Severus is a bit stressed. Potions research."

Harry showed Luna around, talked a little with her and reluctantly saw her off at the entrance. When he closed the door behind her, Severus, who was sitting on the sofa with his book, directed a level stare at Harry.

"A bit stressed?" he asked.

Harry cleared his throat.

"I found out that the art teacher is a member of the Phoenix Order," he said.

No answer.

"She said that she had spoken to you before."

"She is a capable witch," Severus remarked in a bored tone and continued reading his book. The statement, coming from Severus, was ample praise. Harry was about to return to his bedroom when Severus clutched at his left forearm.

Harry hurried to him and sat down on the sofa. Severus's face was blank, masking the discomfort.

"Is there nothing at all to alleviate the pain?" Harry asked softly.

Severus glared at him.

"Don't you think I would have done that if I could? Imbecile question," he snapped viciously.

Harry, who was more than well accustomed to Severus's acrid temper, took the comment with quiet composure and added after a few moments' thought:

"Maybe when you have gone through pain for a very long time, then you become so used to it that you don't think it's worth counteracting."

Severus looked at him sharply; and Harry knew that his words had touched upon the truth.

"I have to go," Severus said, rising from the sofa and grabbing his travelling cloak.

Harry sighed and sat down on the place which Severus had occupied only a few moments ago. It was still warm from his body heat.

°Pallu: part of the sari which is draped over the shoulder. According to which region of India the wearer comes from or to the sari fashions, the pallu falls either over the back or over the front of the body, depending on how the sari is draped.

Chapter 13

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A/N: yaoi-fied: Severus knows Sonia Mukherjee because they're in the same Order – there's nothing more to it :-)

Not long after his brief but enlightening conversation with Sonia Mukherjee, Harry was summoned by Albus Dumbledore.

"Harry, would you like to join the Order of the Phoenix?" the Headmaster asked.

"I was wondering when you would ask, sir," Harry said with a small smile. "The answer is yes, of course."

Dumbledore looked gratified, beaming at his protégé through his half-moon spectacles.

"In that case, Harry, you are our new member. I am afraid that there is no time for formalities and official ceremonies; but in the meantime, Severus will teach you the talking form of the Patronus, which is the main method of communication within the Order besides Fawkes's feathers. However, Fawkes does tend to be indisposed on a Burning Day, which is why we cannot expect him to be present all the time."

Fawkes raised a leg and scratched his neck thoroughly before pecking at a pile of sesame seeds.

"Er…Professor, perhaps Professor McGonagall or Professor Moody or some other Order member could teach me," Harry suggested delicately.

"I have already informed Severus, Harry, and he has agreed," Dumbledore informed him with a benign smile, "you are married,

after all."

Yeah, right, Harry thought sarcastically.

"Okay, fine, good," he said aloud, hoping that he would prove more adept at producing talking Patronuses than mastering Occlumency.

"I'm sure that it will be fine, Harry. Welcome to the Order, my dear boy."

"Thank you, Professor."

Dumbledore rose and patted Harry's shoulder as Harry left.

Arriving at Nessa's portrait, Harry promptly gave her his news.

"I've got to take lessons with Severus. He is to teach me how to produce a speaking Patronus," he told her glumly.

"The pictures in the castle know that you are very good with casting Patronuses. What is there to worry about, young one?" Nessa asked.

"Well…the teacher," Harry said meaningfully.

"Regard it as a challenge to prove to him what you are capable of. Tell me, how is your sketching after your first class? You were so positive about it."

"Well, I still have to wait for the practical part until I can really experiment. I've always scraped away with a quill on normal paper up to now. I want to learn the proper technique, and I have to wait until the next lesson for that."

"Ah. Another heart-to-heart chat," a sneering voice said behind him. Harry moved aside as Severus approached and said the password. Severus had been in a worse mood than usual after his meeting with Voldemort, whose obscene interest in Severus's and Harry's supposedly abusive marriage was sickening. Severus had explained

curtly to Harry that Voldemort had undergone so many transformations that he was physically incapable of experiencing sexual pleasure or performing the sexual act. Severus had spoken in a tone which had sounded like it was all Harry's fault.

"I have been charged with the unhappy prospect of contributing to your education," Severus said as they walked inside the room.

"Dumbledore just told me," Harry replied quietly. "What shape does your Patronus take, if I may ask?"

"Ashwinder," Severus answered snappily. A magical serpent whose eggs were a Potions ingredient. Of course. Eggs which were used in Love Potions. How ironic.

"Mine is a-"

"-stag. I saw it during that tedious Quidditch match of yours in your third year. How sentimentally boring," Severus drawled.

"How you can find a happy memory to help you produce a Patronus is frankly amazing," Harry commented, his hackles rising.

"Your amazement does not impress me," Severus remarked.

"Why did you agree to teach me how to produce a talking Patronus?"

"Because the Headmaster asked me to. And since I am slightly more optimistic about your Patronus-casting abilities…"

Harry knew that he was recalling Harry's struggles with Potions and Occlumency.

"Lessons on Thursday nights at nine o'clock in our rooms, and I hope for your sake that you show promise. You were abysmal even in bed," Severus said, closing the door of the hall in Harry's face. Harry stared at the door, very hurt and unhappy at the cruelty of the last sentence. He swallowed down the lump in his throat. Whatever little hope he had for a peaceable interaction between them was

extinguished. The remark had been totally uncalled for, to say nothing of extremely mean. Anger boiled within him before turning to suffocating ashes. He pressed his lips together, fighting down his tears. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and chose the Potions laboratory – he was sure he had heard Severus go in there. Severus turned, eyes narrowed dangerously.

"I think I told you never to set your foot inside this room," he whispered.

"And I thought I asked you to treat me with respect!" Harry snarled, drawing out his wand. "Do you expect people to be fantastic in bed when they're being ripped apart against their wishes? How can you expect Hollywood sex if our marriage is so screwed up? Oh, I know that you had no choice. But you could have chosen not to say such a remark! You are a lousy husband, Severus Snape. Protector my ass! And another thing. Do not even dream of bullying me about Patronuses, because I refuse to be taught by you. In the meantime, enjoy the company of my Dad. *Expecto Patronum!* "

The stag flashed out of his wand-tip, illuminating the dark laboratory with its blinding silver glow. To spite Severus even more, Harry seized a jar of powder, which he knew was harmless, and smashed it onto the floor. The jar could be repaired, but the powder was a lost case. Before Severus could move or speak, Harry walked off, crashing the door closed behind him. Their marriage was appropriately characterised by the slamming of doors, he thought angrily.

In the evening, a few hours after his umpteenth clash with Severus, Harry, fed up of staying in his bedroom most of the time, slipped out into the hall with the art class syllabus and a book on sketching technique. He settled down on the sofa, which was Severus's favourite piece of furniture. Harry didn't care. Hadn't Nessa told him that Severus's rooms were his as well? He was sure that this could be safely applied to at least some of the furniture. Bedroom furniture was another matter altogether, of course, considering that Severus and he had separate bedrooms and beds. What an inspiring

marriage, Harry thought bitterly as he opened his book and tried to read. When he heard the door open and Severus come in, he feigned deafness, staring resolutely at the print. Severus approached the sofa. Harry scrupulously avoided looking up. He had made enough efforts and humiliated himself far too many times just for the sake of talking nicely with the man.

"Potter-" Severus began, but Harry interrupted him flatly:

"Don't talk to me. And don't come near me. You can't stand me anyway, so keep at a safe distance, husband of mine."

"I'm going out for a drink," Severus said tersely after a nasty pause.

"Sure. Go ahead. Get laid. I'm sure you'll find someone who can attend to your basic instincts better than I can. I don't give a damn," Harry said, turning the page of his book rather violently. There was a slight tearing sound, as if the page had suffered some damage.

"If you agree to accompany me, then we can Apparate to the bar at the edge of the grounds," Severus said.

Harry stared at him, not believing his ears. Then he rallied himself. It was probably for a practical reason, probably Order-related. It could not possibly be to display themselves in public as a loving couple. Severus would have chosen a wizarding bar for this purpose. But the idea was absurd. Severus would never think of public displays, staged or not staged.

"Is the Order meeting up there? I doubt we're going out to toast my joining the Order, are we?"

"No, the Order is not meeting there," Severus said testily.

"Uhm…Please give me five minutes to change," Harry said, jumping up and darting to his bedroom.

Severus Snape was not an impulsive man. He had found married life worse than unmarried life so far. Harry Potter was an unmitigated nuisance, showing off his Parseltongue abilities and daring to set foot into his rooms with his friends. True, Severus had told him grudgingly that he could bring his friends along, but he regarded it as a violation of his sanctified quarters. However, seeing Harry's strong reaction to his remark concerning the consummation of their bonding had not left him unaffected. The young man had been seething with rage. But what had decided him was the amazing Patronus. No one could choose the shape of his or her Patronus. And Harry carried the memory of his father in his heart and the memory of his mother in his eyes. He was far more sensitive than James Potter or Sirius Black. He still had difficulties controlling his emotions, but producing a fully-fledged Patronus when he was so upset showed a lot of promise. Severus was starting to acknowledge that he was married to someone whom it was worth getting to know better. And there were little things about the young man which he was only just beginning to notice. The way Harry tried to flatten his hair when he was nervous and tense. The narrowing of his green eyes when he was angry. And his kindness. He could not imagine James Potter hanging around with someone like Luna Lovegood, for instance. Or trying to make an effort to get to know him, Severus Snape, better. Or showing that he cared when Severus experienced pain because of the Dark Mark…

"I'm ready," Harry's voice interrupted his thoughts.

Severus turned around and looked at him. Harry's slight figure was wrapped in a cloak. It was cool outside.

"You may want to use an Ear-warming Charm in winter," Severus said a little stiffly.

"Did you ever get an inflammation of the middle ear?" Harry asked.

"Yes. It is most disagreeable. Luckily, wizarding remedies are very quick."

There was an awkward silence after this succinct exchange.

Severus strode towards the door, opening it. He stood back to let Harry pass before him.

Nessa the snake watched their cloaked figures pensively before coiling tightly around her pestle and napping.

Chapter 14

CHAPTER 14

AN:

3cheers4Snape: Thanks for pointing out the spelling issue with Sonja's/Sonia's name. I also just remembered that Jhumpa Lahiri uses "Sonia" (short for Sonali) in her book *The Namesake* …In Switzerland, "Sonja" is the preferred variant (among the Swiss people).

yaoi-fied: Naughty, naughty…:-D

The bar was a cosy and homely place with old-fashioned wood panels and a charming creaking floor. Harry peeled off his cloak, revealing a black button-up shirt and tight blue jeans. Severus himself was dressed in black trousers and a crisp shirt similar to Harry's.

Severus's eyes flitted over Harry's figure appraisingly while Harry looked at Severus equally assessingly. They ordered their drinks and went over to a table.

Severus watched his young husband closely. His manners were very correct. No elbows on the table. No wiping the mouth with the hand. Good posture, neither stiff as a board or hunched up. The green eyes behind his spectacles seemed pensive. He noticed Severus's scrutiny and raised his hand to flatten his disobedient hair in a gesture which indicated nervousness.

"There's a young man who seems to be interested in you, Potter," Severus remarked.

"I am not interested in him."

"You haven't even looked at him. He's sitting at the table on your left."

Harry frowned slightly and looked over. A sleek brown-haired man, a little older than him, flashed him a bold smile.

Harry averted his gaze at once.

"But I'm with you! Surely he can see that from this distance!"

"Potter, do we look like a married couple? I am old enough to be your father."

"Do married couples have a certain look about them? Do couples have to be married to look like couples? Or be the same age?"

"Why don't you go over to that nice young man?" Severus suggested.

Harry stared at him, astonished.

"But you didn't invite me to spend time with someone else. And this is a bar. People are not only out for friendship here, right?"

"Am I such a good catch that you are so reluctant to converse casually with him?"

"Did you bring me here so that you could watch me flirt with someone else? That's…that would be really…odd, Severus. Do you really think I would do that?"

Severus realised that he was making one faux pas after the other, each worse than its predecessor. Harry was becoming quite upset and angry; his face was tense and his posture was stiffening.

"I apologise if I misjudged you. I was under the impression that a young eighteen-year-old man like you would be keen on… experimenting, especially in a marriage of convenience."

If he had hoped to pacify Harry with this remark, then he was badly mistaken.

"Experiment? You mean, sleep right and left with people? Okay, I don't want to sound judgmental. Some people do it, and it's their business as long as they use protection. I just do not happen to be the type. I'm not saying that I haven't done a bit of self-exploration-"

he broke off, going very red. Before Severus could comment or respond, he plunged on:

"-and I guess you know about Cho Chang and how it ended, but apart from the fact that I'm not the fling-type, I don't think a relationship would be safe for my partner with Voldemort after my ass. And talking of Voldemort…Where is there time to think of dating and stuff? And last but not least, I am married. I have got a sense of commitment. You really don't know me well at all, Severus."

There was an awkward silence during which they both looked away from each other. The brown-haired man had found someone to talk to in the meantime.

"What about you? I mean…er…have you had many…relationships?" Harry asked, expecting to be snarled at.

Severus shrugged.

"Never anything serious. Every once in a while a man from a muggle or wizarding bar. And if they'd try to talk me into excluding protection, then I would hex them."

"Hex them? How?"

"Make them suffer from impotence for a month and modify their memories afterwards."

"One *month* ? Merlin! But they must have gone hormonally overboard after that one month, or suffered some, er, physical

damage."

Severus's mouth curled in a rather malicious smile.

"I wouldn't know," he said silkily.

Harry was quite bewildered. He could hardly believe that he was talking to Severus about intimate relationships, of all things. Or that he had implied to Severus that he pleasured himself.

Severus, for his part, decided that Harry was innocent verging on charmingly naïve. His shocked reaction when Severus had suggested that he talk to someone else in the bar had said everything he had ever wanted to know. Considering that Harry had been forced into a loveless union with him, it came as a surprise that a smart good-looking youth like him did not avail himself of the first opportunity to get rid of Severus and flirt with another person. He wondered why. Did Harry have such an overwhelming sense of duty? Any emotional attachment to him, Severus, was naturally out of the question.

Severus found the green eyes studying him curiously.

"May I ask you something personal?" Harry said.

Severus's eyes narrowed a little. He was extremely reluctant to tell anyone anything personal about himself – least of all Harry. But for the sake of some kind of ceasefire…

"It depends," he said. "I need to hear your question first. If it is impudent or moronic, you will have to suffer my anger."

"What was realising that you were gay like?"

Severus gazed at him impassively for a few moments. It was an extremely personal question, all right. Impudent brat, he growled to himself inwardly. Mentally gritting his teeth, he asked:

"For me or for others?"

"Both." Two questions shoved into one, just like the two of them had been shoved into this wretched marriage.

"I was upset. I knew that I would be judged and condemned. There are wizards and witches who claim that homosexuals contribute to the lack of magical progeny."

"That's bullshit!" Harry exclaimed loudly.

"Unfortunately not for them, Potter. I am mocked on a regular basis by Voldemort and the Death Eaters because of my sexuality, as I was mocked by others at Hogwarts."

Harry's throat felt dry.

"Severus, did my Dad and Sirius know that you were gay and… and…bully you because of it?"

"A few times. Your mother stopped them."

He sipped his drink. Harry was feeling ill.

"I don't think they were prejudiced against homosexuality, Potter, but they tried using it as a weapon against me because, as you are aware of, we hated each other."

"My Mom stopped them?"

Severus's thin mouth curved into a bitter smile.

"She told them how low they were being and to stop it."

"If she defended you, then why did you call her a Mudblood?" Harry asked bluntly, aware of the dangerous ground he was treading upon, "was it because you were so humiliated in front of that crowd? Or… were you starting to learn more about the Dark Arts?"

"I do not wish to talk about it," Severus said sharply.

Harry tried another tack.

"On our wedding certificate, it is indicated that you had a witch mother. Were you thinking of your muggle father? After what I saw in the Pensieve-"

"You have asked me enough questions, and I have given you enough answers," Severus interrupted him, his voice soft as a whisper – a sign of imminent anger.

"I'm sorry. It's just…I'm trying to understand why you are insecure."

Severus's face tautened, and Harry realised that he was he who had committed a faux pas now.

"I…I mean…You do so much, go through such a lot of danger, but-"

"That's enough, Potter," Severus snapped.

Harry apologised again, flushing. He realised that Severus was determined to keep him scratching at the surface. It was strange. Severus had admitted to having flings without embarrassment or anger and talked about experiencing his homosexuality, which Harry felt just as intimate, if not more intimate, than his childhood.

"May I ask you just one more question?"

Severus's eyes gleamed rather like the time they had when he had given Harry the potion which had solved the problem of his colour-changing hair in such a radical manner.

"The very last one, Potter."

"Uhm…are you reconciled to your homosexuality today? Do you accept it as a perfectly natural part of you?"

Severus took long to answer. He looked into Harry's green eyes, and there was confusion in them.

"I don't know," he said finally. The words seemed to be tugged out of him against his will. Severus Snape admitting that he didn't know something was unimaginable. The answer, however, was enough for Harry. If Severus was not confident about how to feel towards his sexuality, then he was probably uneasy about it.

"What about you, Potter? Did you cry when realisation dawned on you? That you would not end up with a nice girl, marry her and raise rug rats?"

"I didn't cry. I just took it as it came. I was confused at first. A bit upset, or perhaps sort of wary because I had to think of how intolerant people are towards homosexuality. I told Hermione and Ron when I was certain. I also asked them to keep it confidential. And then…Well, Lavender Brown asked me out, and I refused very politely. Ron happened to be around, and he blurted out that I preferred men anyway. And…Yeah…That's all it took for my private life to be splashed across the media. The news was all over the school within a day. But I feel comfortable with my being gay although I've never been or done anything intimate with another man - except for you, that is. Being gay is a natural part of my identity, of who I am. If others feel uncomfortable with it, then it's their problem."

"I am not surprised by Mr Weasley's impetuous action," Severus remarked with a curl of his lip.

"I don't blame Ron. It just happened. He was really down after that, saying that it was all his own fault and stuff. I still think it would have come out anyway, and it was better to be dissected earlier than later." Harry sipped at his Coke. The conversation had been interesting so far, if not quite comfortable. Severus spoke with a certain abruptness and sarcasm which made it difficult to approach him, and their dialogue was punctuated with tense pauses and awkward silences every now and then. In fact, they were silent now.

Severus examined the walls of the bar leisurely and looked over at the brown-haired man who was conversing fluently with his

companion. Harry noticed Severus's wandering look and interpreted this as Severus being bored by his company.

"So you'll be teaching me how to conjure the talking form of the Patronus?" Harry asked for the sake of saying something.

Severus gave him a scornful look.

"Obviously. You don't think a fit of teenage anger is going to prevent me from accomplishing my duties?"

Harry chose not to respond. Severus was still determined to see him as an immature tantrum-prone person who was not an adult and most certainly not on an equal level with him in any aspect. He and Severus did not talk much for the rest of the evening, and when they returned to the dungeons, Harry had mixed feelings about the outing. It had not been genuine and it had definitely not been either comfortable or cordial. Harry constantly had to walk on eggshells around the man and be very careful how he formulated his sentences, which was not exactly his forte. In the hall of their quarters, Harry thanked Severus politely for the evening spent away from Hogwarts for a change. All Severus said in response was that he hoped Harry would be punctual for his lesson on Thursday.

He probably he thinks that he has rectified the damage of that nasty comment of his, Harry mused with a trace of bitterness. At the same time, he was still astonished that Severus had not flung his drink into his face when Harry had asked him about his private life.

Probably also part of the apology, that's the only reason he answered, Harry added mentally. He opened the door to his bedroom and undid the fastenings of his cloak. He summoned his sketchbook and a handful of worn colour crayons and broodingly sketched a picture of a padlocked door. For him, it was the perfect symbol of his marriage with Severus and he was still searching desperately for the key. For a moment, he had been so close to grasping that key – when Severus had admitted that he didn't know what he felt like about his homosexuality. It was after that admittance

that the conversation had turned cold. Harry switched to a new leaf of his sketchbook and started drawing an iceberg surrounded by a ring of dying fire.

Chapter 15

CHAPTER 15

Nothing seemed to have changed between Severus and Harry after their outing to the bar. Severus continued giving him easy Potions tasks and treating him distantly. Harry tried to remain indifferent to Severus's behaviour, but he was secretly unhappy about the state of affairs between them. Although he was used to the cold atmosphere in the rooms he shared with the Potions Master, it was uncomfortable and dispiriting; and if he had thought that learning how to cast a Talking Patronus was easier than mastering Occlumency, then he was sadly mistaken.

The lessons took place in the Severus's library. Severus was not an encouraging teacher, as not only Harry but also the whole Hogwarts knew. Harry discovered that casting a Patronus and projecting his voice, or rather his thoughts into it, was extremely difficult. Severus made no effort to hide his derision.

"Why, your Patronus-casting abilities are not that impressive at all," he sneered, watching the stag hover against the wall, eyes narrowed at the thought that James Potter was in the same room with in this shape. After a while, Harry was too despondent and tired to produce a fully-fledged Patronus. Instead, thin silvery wisps came out of his wand-tip feebly, spiralling into nothingness.

"How promising," Severus mocked him.

"How can you expect me to learn anything when you don't bother to treat me with respect?" Harry snapped, sticking his wand into the pocket of his jeans.

"Don't raise your voice."

"You obviously hate teaching me – or anyone, for that matter. Look, maybe it's better if someone else taught me-"

"The Headmaster asked *me* to teach you," Severus interrupted him sleekly.

"How ironic it is that my own husband has to be asked to teach me something and treats me with such arrogance, giving me sub-standard jobs when it comes to Potions, telling me in which rooms to go and not to go-" he broke off. Accusations were not going to help the situation. In fact, they were bound to aggravate it.

"Show me how to produce that Patronus, Severus. Please show me. Is it enough if your husband asks you to do that?"

Severus eyed him expressionlessly. Finally, with a sigh, he walked over to a bookshelf.

"Did you do any preliminary reading?" he asked.

"Yes, I did." Harry listed a few titles. Severus shook his head.

"Those are no good. *This* is good." He deposited a huge tome in Harry's arms. It looked worn from constant use. He moved next to Harry, opened the book and leafed through it.

"You will kindly read this chapter for next lesson," he said.

"Thank you," Harry answered.

Severus simply shrugged and retired to the furniture set in one corner of the vast room. The shadows seem to swallow him up. Harry hesitated. What if he went over to Severus and said that he was going to read the chapter on the spot? He chewed his lip, then followed what his mind suggested. Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Do you have a question or comment?" he asked in a bored tone.

"Er…no." Harry stood around awkwardly, then prudently decided to read the book in his bedroom. Feeling silly and small, he quietly left Severus to his own devices.

The weeks passed. The weather became colder. Harry made progress with his Talking Patronus under Severus's exigent instruction. The Head of Slytherin was impassive, addressing Harry coolly. He never praised Harry's skill, preferring to remain silent instead.

Harry knew from long-term experience that his lack of comment during lessons meant that he was satisfied. Harry naturally preferred this to his scathing remarks, though it was not exactly an ideal type of motivation. Also, Severus stopped coming over to Harry whenever he was in the middle of preparing Potions ingredients. Instead, he would look at Harry's work after Harry had finished, and, once again, turn away without comment. His lessons with Shacklebolt (who humorously insisted that Harry call him "King" like everyone else did), Moody and McGonagall were far more rewarding. Even McGonagall, who was just as strict as Severus, gave him a rare smile now and then – something which had always been reserved exclusively for Hermione.

In the meantime, the art class was flourishing. The double lesson on Friday evenings was always looked forward to; Sonia Mukherjee's popularity was well established. She had a very nice way of dealing with Luna's eccentric paintings and ideas, calling them "stylishly surreal". For instance, a sketch of mistletoe with two malicious-looking eyes peering out from among the white berries was titled "The Nargle". Luna gave it to Harry when Harry remarked that it was a very interesting sketch. He himself was happily absorbed in his new pursuit, regarding it as an excellent outlet to express creativity he had never though he possessed and emotions which he had never set down or analysed. He focused a lot of figurativity and symbolism. He had an affinity for somewhat melancholic scenes and preferred using normal ink to the one which animated pictures. Their first sketches dealt mainly with drawing technique and drawing tools.

After that, they moved on to the perception of space, size, angles etc. before each participant could truly focus on his and her individual creativity. Their teacher moved around most the time, watching, suggesting, correcting and offering encouragement.

"A little more shadow over here, Mr Potter," she murmured, "that way it looks authentically three-dimensional."

Feedback between the students was very useful. The pupils exchanged sketches and discussed them in groups. In the middle of November, after about eight weeks, Sonia Mukherjee said:

"Sketch something which strikes you in your surroundings. It can be anything – a candle, an apple, or a chair. You are also free to use any sketching medium you want. The choice is yours – except for one thing. Please use only normal ink or pencils. No animation allowed. As yet."

And so, armed with a graphite pencil and a sheet of special drawing paper, Harry wandered around his rooms while Severus read in the hall, lounging comfortably in his favourite sofa near the fireside. Severus narrowed his eyes from behind his book as Harry paced about. When the restless young man circled the room for the third time, Severus opened his mouth to make a disparaging comment but refrained when Harry stopped in front of the shelf on which the bejewelled bottle containing their bonding blood was kept. After a little while, Harry reached up and took it. Of course, no one else in the classroom would sketch one. Severus's keen gaze followed his movements. When Harry turned around, he was once again fully absorbed in his book. Harry placed the bottle on the parquet boards where there was an inspiring patch of light and shadow and sat down on the floor, cross-legged, his sketching paper on a stiff board of cardboard as he started to sketch. A pair of keen black eyes resurfaced from behind the book. Harry was too engrossed in his work to notice the cessation of pages turning regularly. Finally, Harry rose and replaced the bottle on its shelf.

"You may not want to tell your classmates what exactly you have splashed all over your sheet of paper. We don't want the Dark Lord to know about the protective bond, do we?" Severus's sneering voice floated from the sofa. Harry silently tucked the pencil away in the old box which had been given to every student on a temporary basis at the beginning of the term.

"Did you hear me, Potter?" the voice insisted.

"I know better than to tell anyone," Harry replied resignedly.

"Have you finished with that scribbling of yours?"

"It's sketching, not scribbling."

"I don't think it makes a difference when it comes to you, Potter."

Harry strode back to his bedroom, closing the door irritably. His cheeks were flushed with anger. It was so like Severus to sour up something he was enjoying and felt confident in.

He felt bleak despair at the depth of Severus's dislike towards him. Everyone at Hogwarts knew that the famous wizarding hero was married to the notorious Potions Master, but no one dared to ask him about any particulars. People who had opened their mouths had had to take only one look at the flash in his green eyes before they had thought better of it. Ginny, Luna and his other friends, too, refrained from asking any precise questions. It was so contradictory that Harry had chosen to sketch the flask which contained the bonding blood. In class, when he was asked to describe the object, he said that it was a decorative object which belonged to Severus. Sonia Mukherjee, however, looked at him keenly with a knowing look in her bright eyes. She was discreet by nature, and she was also a Phoenix Order member: she nodded at his explanation and remarked that he had a good eye for light and shadow. She was wearing black robes like all the students and her fellow-teachers. Harry recalled how forbidding Severus seemed in his robes. Mukherjee looked as approachable as ever. She liked alternating between saris, salwar

kameezes and robes in different colours and cuts. It came as a true refreshment for Harry, who was used to the stagnation of the dungeons and the remote mood of his husband. When he went back in the dungeons with his corrected sketch, he discovered Severus on the sofa with a cup of tea before him on the table and – naturally – a book in his hand; he did not look up when Harry re-entered their rooms. As soon as Harry had passed the fireside and had his back towards him, he lowered his book, his dark eyes travelling over the slight form of the young wizard as he stood in front of the shelf, comparing his sketch with the bejewelled flask. He casually turned a page as Harry retraced his steps, now heading for his bedroom.

The next day, Severus watched Harry through a haze of smoke while he brewed a potion and Harry chopped up piles of fresh mint leaves. His eyes lingered on Harry's hands before travelling to his face. A cloud of steam escaped from his cauldron, covering Harry's glasses with mist. Harry removed them. Snape cleared the steam with a flick of his wand, tracing the lines of Harry's face with his penetrating gaze. Only eighteen years old, Severus mused. A man in the freshest blossom of adulthood. Harry shoved his glasses onto his nose and continued reducing the last batch of mint leaves to fine little shreds.

"I'm done," he said to Severus, who rose and wordlessly transferred the chopped mint into a glass vial, which he then emptied into the cauldron.

"Please stir this slowly in a counter-clockwise motion," he said to Harry. Harry blinked. Then he warily approached the cauldron and patiently stirred the heady-smelling contents until Severus told him that it was enough. The slender fingers took the stirring stick from Harry; the potion was tasted, pronounced satisfactory and bottled up.

"To alleviate the symptoms of stomach-flu," Severus explained impassively to Harry. "I am experimenting with a new flavour after universal complaints about the taste."

Harry managed not to blink again. Severus usually never bothered to explain what kind of potions he brewed when Harry was around. Harry wondered if this had to do with the fact that he had chosen to sketch the symbol of their blood bond.

Chapter 16

CHAPTER 16

A/N:

GothicSidhe: Harry won't have a crush on Sonia Mukherjee. He is simply contrasting the way black robes look on different people.

Harry was standing in the middle of his large bedroom, wand raised.

" *Expecto Patronum* !" he said, then closed his eyes, summoning his magic and transferring his mental voice to the stag which errupted. It was very difficult because he not only had to speak for the Patronus but also guide its movements. The Patronus announced:

"Beware, here I come!"

"Harry suppressed a grin, holding on to his concentration. He practised for another half an hour until he started to feel tired. Then, feeling up to no good, and knowing that he was being rash, he uttered the incantation a last time and opened his bedroom door. The stag floated out into the hall and into the library. He knew that Severus liked to spend Saturday afternoons closeted with his books as he wrote an extensive research paper. Harry left his bedroom door ajar, closing his eyes and concentrating with all his might, wand hand still outstretched.

A few seconds later, the door of the library was ripped open and a flurry of robes approached his bedroom at alarming speed.

"POTTER!"

Harry's bedroom door bounced back against the wall as Severus obscured the doorway, eyes blazing with anger.

"I was just practising," Harry said innocently.

"PRACTISING? WHEN DID I EVER TEACH YOU TO MAKE YOUR PATRONUS SAY: 'HEY MAN' TO ME?"

"Ah, so you understood what it said," Harry replied calmly.

Severus gave him a withering glare and did not deign to say anything more. He turned on his heel and strode back to the library. Harry covered his mouth with his hand, trying not to laugh loudly. He sat down on the small carpet on the floor and pulled out a book on sketching.

He had just opened it when something thin and silvery floated into his room. It was an Ashwinder. Its eyes glowed at him as Severus's voice, now soft and silky, said to him:

"If you disturb me one more time, Potter, then you will be very sorry indeed."

It disappeared.

Harry discovered that he was not intimidated by the threat. He sent forth his stag with the message:

"Very sorry? Why on earth? It looks like you can discontinue the Patronus lessons and dedicate yourself fully to that complicated research paper."

Severus Snape's eyes narrowed dangerously as Harry's Patronus trotted nonchalantly into the library for the second time and talked to him.

"Impertinent," he growled after listening to it, rising and leaving his books in quest of his rebellious spouse, whom he found sitting cross-legged on the floor, reading.

"POTTER!" he roared, high cheekbones flushed with irritation.

"Oh good, you came. I wasn't sure you'd be dragged out of the library again," Harry said boldly, getting up.

Severus walked over to Harry slowly, his body language and gaze menacing. He stopped walking when their bodies and noses were nearly touching.

"And why did you have the audacity to disturb me?"

"Well…I wanted to thank you for teaching me how to produce a Talking Patronus."

Severus's stare did not soften.

"Couldn't it wait?"

"I prefer thanking my husband in person."

"Husband," Severus snarled, grimacing as if he was saying something distasteful. He continued drilling into Harry's eyes with his fiery gaze. Harry looked back steadily. Severus realised that he was so close to him that one of the unruly strands of Harry's hair was touching his forehead. He could see the tiniest part of the scar behind the messy fringe. He noticed the endless black of the pupils and brilliant green colour of the irises, and the darker circle which separated them from the white. He was looking into the face of a youth-adult, and his sensitive nostrils, so used to Potions ingredients, were inhaling the smell of Harry's freshly showered body. His mind began to separate the information his nose was transmitting to him and it also started to analyse the person to whom he was married. He averted his eyes and stepped away from Harry, now looking around the room. He had never bothered to even glance at the interior of his husband's personal architectural sphere. The room was surprisingly neat. Obviously, growing up had mercifully equipped Harry with a sense of organisation. Or was it his upbringing with the Dursleys, who, to give the devil his due, were extremely disciplined about order? Or was it being married to a no-nonsense Potions Master?

"You actually read," he stated rudely, seeing the many books on the shelves.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"Very," Severus answered coolly. He reached out and extracted the book he had lent Harry for his Patronus lessons.

"I assume that you won't need my book anymore," he added and whisked out of the room.

Harry rolled his eyes and closed the door.

The next week was eventful. Professor Mukherjee gave the students an even more interesting assignment than last time: they were to pair up and one was to draw the other's face till the neckline, and, the week after that, switch roles. Luna and Harry decided to work together.

"I'll draw you first, Harry," Luna said happily, already taking his measurements with her eyes.

"You may dress up and paint your faces –girls *and* boys," Mukherjee said, "but don't overdo it."

The class was delighted.

"I'm going to dress up as one of those classical music composers, with powdered wigs and stuff," someone giggled.

"I'll stay the way I am," another student said hastily.

Harry silently agreed with her, but Luna was going through all kinds of creatures of dubious existence and wondering how to apply them to Harry. They were both rescued by Ginny, whom they met after dinner and who suggested that Harry would look good as a type of seductive vampire she had read about in a muggle book filched from the twins' room.

"I really don't know," Harry said tentatively.

"Don't worry, you don't know how much make-up my roommates have been accumulating in the dorm," Ginny reassured Harry, "I'm sure the girls will lend me everything they have if I tell them whom I'm going to make up."

Luna looked delighted. Harry swallowed.

"Erm…Look…"

"Come on, Harry!" Ginny insisted.

Harry looked from bright brown eyes to dreamy pale blue ones.

"Yeah, okay, fine," he muttered, shuffling his feet.

"We could come down to your rooms, Harry. I do think Professor Snape's taste in lighting is quite inspiring," Luna remarked.

"I'd love to see what his rooms look like," Ginny said interestedly, "Fred and George are going to be mad at me having got the privilege instead of them."

"Well, Severus – Snape – said that I'm to keep my friends only in my bedroom."

Luna seemed disappointed.

"I'll ask him. I mean, they're my rooms as well, he's just not used to, er, sharing after living alone for such a long time."

Ginny and Luna nodded gravely, but Harry knew that they probably knew that he was just being polite about Severus's reclusive habits. Still, true to his word, he explained the assignment to Severus and asked him whether Luna could sketch him in the hall because the effect of shadow and light were more interesting than in his bedroom.

Severus shrugged.

"Three teenagers in my quarters. How lovely. I don't want any racket or running around. They are not to speak to me. And therefore no silly questions from that eccentric Lovegood girl concerning fictitious Potions ingredients," he said.

"As if *you* are not eccentric," Harry remarked. Severus icily ignored this observation and retired to his library.

On Tuesday evening, Severus raised a slim eyebrow as loud laughter erupted from Harry's room. There was a pause; the bedroom door opened and the three friends emerged, Harry in the middle. Severus stared.

Harry was dressed in the usual wizarding black robes; but Luna and Ginny had rimmed his eyes with black eye shadow, mascara and kajal. His face was covered with powder, and the tips of his hair were green.

Severus's mouth quivered slightly, and he brushed his knuckles across his mouth, managing to regain his composure.

"Miss Lovegood and Miss Weasley, what in Merlin's name have you been doing with my husband?" he asked, forgetting about not wanting to have any interaction with them.

"Ginny helped me to give him a vampiric touch," Luna explained in dreamy tones.

"Vampiric touch?" Severus said incredulously.

"We thought fangs would look a bit *trashy* , though," Ginny said brightly.

Severus eyed Harry critically, savouring the long-suffering look in the green eyes.

"You may want to take off most of that awful powder. Also, lining the inner rims of the eyes with that black stuff is extremely unhealthy. However, since this is hopefully just the one occasion, it shouldn't harm him. You may want to rouge his mouth a little, though," he addressed Luna and Ginny.

All three teenagers blinked.

Severus raised both eyebrows this time.

"Rouged lips, my dears, are said to be most sensual in both muggle and wizarding fiction, even if it may not correspond to the facts. An androgynous look is very popular in literature, art and other domains. Call it…artistic license."

Harry flushed underneath the white powder coating his face. Sensual? And the way Severus had pronounced it. Sensual…

"Oh, I think I've got a small pot of red lip gloss with me," Ginny said, bounding back to Harry's room.

The black eyes studied Harry keenly again.

"Which of you chose those green highlights for your hair?" he asked.

"Ginny did," Harry said, smiling.

"I bow to your impeccable hair-styling taste, Miss Weasley," Severus said, inclining his head gravely towards Ginny as she returned with the red paint. "Now, what about that rouge?"

It was in a state of complete astonishment that Ginny, Luna and especially Harry accepted Severus's involvement in their project. Severus himself dabbed rouge on Harry's mouth with a pencil. He had scrupulously disinfected it beforehand with a Cleaning Charm which had caused a few hairs to fall out of the brush. For some reason or the other, Harry discovered his cheeks growing very warm indeed as Severus gently dabbed a tiny amount of crimson colour

onto his lips. Ginny in the meantime removed the white powder from his face. Once she had finished touching up his make-up and hairdo, she had to leave for Gryffindor Tower and do her homework. Luna and Harry settled down, and Severus retired to the sofa, alternately reading and watching Luna sketch Harry with crayons.

Finally, the drawing was accomplished. Severus remarked that he was no artist but that Luna's painting looked "quite passable". Beaming, Luna thanked Harry with a kiss on his powdered cheek, politely said bye to Severus and drifted out of the dungeons, humming with her portfolio underneath one arm and her bag over her shoulder.

Severus's black eyes swept over Harry's face.

"I have got something which will remove all that paint," Severus said, summoning a jar and a mirror. Instead of handing them to Harry, he murmured a Cleaning Charm over his hands and dabbed the fragrant contents of the jar over Harry's face.

"It smells so good," Harry said, inhaling the scent deeply.

"It contains magical evening primrose, among other things," Severus murmured, gently working the milky cream into Harry's skin, "now close your eyes."

Harry obeyed and felt Severus touch his eyelids.

"Look up at the ceiling and don't blink."

He applied some of the cream to the blackened inner rims of Harry's eyes.

Then, with a flick of his wand, he Vanished the cream, and Harry's face was completely unpainted.

Severus held up the mirror.

"Wow! Brilliant!" Harry said. "How come there's no cosmetic range of yours on the market, Severus? Something like Snape Deluxe…"

Severus snorted and paced back to his cherished sofa.

"Magical accidents involving facial paint are very common," he remarked. "It is a perfectly standard tool. I make it at least once every two weeks for Pomfrey's stores."

"Yeah, but *you* make it."

Severus didn't really know what to say in return. He buried himself into his book instead.

When Harry was back in his bedroom, he lowered the tome.

"Snape Deluxe...!" he muttered, shaking his head. His thin lips, however, curved into a faint smile.

In his room, Harry was grinning to himself.

"Sensual," he laughed, shaking his head as well. And it was odd how Severus had fairly spat out the word "husband" during their staring match and then asked his friends what they had done to "my husband". Harry pensively drew out his sketchbook.

Chapter 17

CHAPTER 17

A/N:

shogi: Harry still has some powder on his face when Severus removes his make-up. He simply suggested that most, but not all, of the powder be removed, which Ginny accordingly did.

The Snicky Snoofs were invented by me.

"Vampiric touch?" Nessa's staccato hiss made Harry grin as he sat in front of her portrait telling her about the sketching session; Nessa had been very curious about Luna and Ginny accompanying him down to the dungeons with bags brimming with styling and sketching equipment.

"Yes, and Severus gave us suggestions on how to improve my, erm, pseudo-vampire look. He applied some rouge to my mouth."

"He did it himself?"

Harry nodded, flushing a little.

"Yeah, with a pencil. He seemed quite interested in what we were doing."

"Ah, that is good, very good, young one!" Nessa rubbed herself happily against her pestle, making it teeter precariously from side to side. She wrapped her tail around the upper end and dangled down, her chest and head raised.

"He is used to you now. When he comes back from his classes, he often looks at the chair on which you are currently sitting. He

sometimes asks me if you have come back from your training lessons when you both happen to be away."

She blinked one beady eye at him.

"He is not the type to call out 'Hello! Anyone at home?' or "Are you back?' He never likes to show that he-" here Nessa slid the rest of her body down the pestle, "-feels responsible for you."

"Well…he chose to be responsible for me by agreeing to the blood bond," Harry said.

"And now he is choosing to be responsible beyond a blood bond," Nessa observed.

Harry reflected.

It was true that Severus and he were arguing less. The last one about Harry's Patronus disturbing him had actually been quite funny – from Harry's point of view, at least.

Severus had also stopped commenting on or sneering at Harry's conversations with Nessa. He could not, however, always refrain from insulting Harry's intelligence. His exaggerated amazement at Harry's books, for instance. Or when he put down Harry's spell work or said that even two-year-olds could chop up ingredients in a certain way when he was not satisfied with Harry's work.

"He doesn't regard me as an equal," he said at last.

"Not yet," Nessa said.

"But in a way…I mean, he's got brilliant brains, and he knows so much, so I can't be his equal-"

"He is older than you are, therefore his knowledge is broader. But you have talents which he does not possess, and he is more skilled in some domains than you are. It is perfectly natural, Harry Potter, it

is one of the world's golden rules. Methinks the Potions Master is interested in your sketches."

"Because he helped with my make-up?"

"Yes." She chuckled again. "Now run along to enjoy the autumn leaves. You may want to sketch some."

Severus Snape glanced down his hooked nose as Sonia Mukherjee, who had just arrived to hold her art class on Friday evening, walked up the stairs to the castle. He gave her a curt nod. She nodded back at him. Severus narrowed his eyes for a moment before calling her, quite correctly, by her title and surname.

"Professor Mukherjee, may I please have a word?" he asked stiffly.

Sonia Mukherjee was not the type to be easily flustered or intimidated by people with lacking social skills. Severus Snape was definitely not very approachable. He was taller than her and he was staring into her eyes in the typical way which unsettled so many people. She looked back at him with perfect composure.

"Certainly," she said.

"How is my husband's performance in your class?"

"He is doing very well. He has skill, patience and plenty of imagination; and he is open to criticism and works hard to improve his technique."

"He shows promise?"

"Oh yes, most definitely, Professor Snape. There is plenty of depth in his drawings."

"Good. I am glad to hear that he is not wasting his or your time."

He nodded briefly at her again and left, this time to ask Professors McGonagall and Moody about Harry's progress. He had already

asked Kingsley Shacklebolt. The Auror was very pleased with his pupil. Severus wanted to make sure that Harry Potter was making an effort and not thinking that he could lean back and let Severus, the blood bond and the Order of the Phoenix do all the dirty work. Apart from that, he did not fancy being married to a spoilt lazy brat. Those were the only reasons. At least, that he is what he kept on repeating to himself even as a small whisper observed that he knew very well about Harry's loveless childhood and determination to fight his way through life…and that the brat was a young man who had managed to remain innocent after all the unpleasant incidents in his past. Innocent after that horrible consummation, wondering about his sexual self. Wondering about his husband Severus Snape. Severus had never touched or been touched by sexually inexperienced men. The fact that he felt guilty about taking away Harry's first sexual experience and turning it into an ordeal instead of something caring and beautiful – how idealistic and silly that sounded to him! – had made him determined to hate Harry more than ever. Except that it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to hate Harry. Severus had hit him in the face, broken his arm (albeit inadvertently), was still generally despicable to him on a verbal level. And Harry had somehow managed to get them to be on minimal talking terms. But Harry also had a sense of dignity (which Severus insisted was arrogance à la James Potter) which was one reason why the two clashed so much. On the other hand, Severus would have hated having a meek submissive spouse. What disturbed him the most was that Harry sometimes reminded him of himself, especially where their childhoods and insecurities were concerned. He knew that Harry was still insecure and wanted approval, except that he never crawled on his stomach to obtain it. Like Severus, he preferred struggling for it. Did he want Severus's approval? Why would he care for Severus or his approval? Did Severus want Harry's approval? Never. Definitely not. He recalled the moment when they had been staring into each other's eyes after Harry's Patronus had disrupted his calm session in the library. Eyes. The green eyes behind the glasses. Beautiful eyes. Severus gritted his teeth. Passable eyes. That was better. A rather nice mouth, too. Supple and soft, parting a little when Severus had applied the rouge to it, the fine hairs of the

pencil caressing every crease of the lips…Grinding his teeth and blaming a long tiring day for his odd thoughts, he finally reached McGonagall's office.

In art class, Luna's sketch of Harry was received very favourably by Professor Mukherjee.

"I must admit that it is quite sensual," she concluded her feedback. Harry grinned inwardly. Sensual. That word again.

"Cool lipstick," one of the students remarked as the class was split into groups to discuss each other's drawings.

"Yeah. Sexy!" was another opinion.

"Come like that to class next time," a girl said to him flirtatiously, ignoring the fact that he was married.

Harry tried to change the conversation so that the feedback was aimed at the artist rather than at the model. Luna didn't seem to mind indirectly receiving praise through her choice and presentation of model.

"From this evening onwards, the model will turn artist and the artist will become the model," Professor Mukherjee announced at the end of the lesson. "You are to switch roles and paint the other. I will keep your sketches and have a closer look at them. You will get them back next week with a few observations and suggestions."

There was a scraping of chairs as people stood up. Harry looked at Luna.

"You know, I was thinking of a kind of pale water theme with lots of light hues and silver shades. You could have something braided into your hair when you sit for me. Silver threads, for example. They'd look really nice in your hair."

"They won't attract the Snicky Snoofs, will they?"

"The what?"

"Snicky Snoofs. They pluck out all your hair overnight."

"No, no, they don't attract any Snicky Snoofs," Harry said briskly. "So what do you think of a water theme? You've got light eyes and hair and a way about you which reminds me of the fluidity of water."

Luna beamed.

"You are becoming quite poetic, Harry. A bit like Professor Snape, you know."

Harry blinked.

"Er…Really?"

"Oh yes, have you ever noticed his alliterations and the way he uses language in general?" Luna remarked.

Now that Harry thought of it, Severus had even written a riddle in poetic form when he had passed the last barrier to discover Quirrell and the Mirror of Erised which protected the Philosopher's Stone.

"Yeah, I have, but I'd never reach his verbal level," Harry laughed.

Talking about Severus and language reminded Harry that the password to their quarters hadn't been changed for ages. He accordingly gave Nessa the new one and sat down on Severus's favourite sofa to write an essay – courtesy of Professor McGonagall, who was adamant about Harry anchoring information in his memory before realising it in practice. Severus soon arrived after him; he had had to attend a staff meeting.

"Potter! I refuse to have *Snape Deluxe* as the new password! And how dare you coax that recalcitrant reptile into rejecting a new password of my choice!" he growled.

"At least she didn't make you guess. I asked her not to. And you ought to be flattered!" Harry answered.

Severus simply skewered him with a glare.

"What did you want to change the password to anyway?" Harry asked.

" *Tourmaline* . A mineral which comes in a great variety of colours. Bi-coloured variations are frequent. The mineral can be green-" here he locked eyes with Harry, "-and rouged with pink or red."

He emphasised "rouge" by drawing out the vowel and switching his gaze to Harry's mouth, which he had rouged not so long ago.

"I'll just be a minute," Harry said, bounding out into the corridor. He returned in a trice.

"The password is *Tourmaline* and you may change it at any time, but Nessa will inform me beforehand. She suggests that we take turns. One month your password and the next month mine."

"How very nice of you, Potter," Severus remarked, his lip curling.

"I agree," Harry said politely. Going along with the sarcasm seemed to work, taking the wind out of Severus's sails. The Head of Slytherin gave him a cold look.

"I may be forced to share most of my rooms with you, Potter, but kindly raise your Gryffindor posterior from *my* sofa," Severus said frigidly.

"Sure," Harry answered, having expected Severus to react just that way. He got up and surreptitiously let an Invisible Itch Bomb drop onto the portion of the seat which Severus usually occupied. It was a new experiment of the Weasley twins and they had sent him a generous sample. The effect, of course, was to send the seated person into an itching and scratching frenzy. If Severus was going to

be rude, then he had to expect resistance. Unless Severus wanted an irate Headmaster vituperating him thoroughly, he would not be able to punish his own husband very severely. And Harry had not forgotten about Severus's radical two-step treatment of his once turquoise nether regions.

"Why *Tourmaline* ?" Harry wondered he strolled off to his bedroom. He could not recall ever having used it or come across it as a Potions ingredient. Maybe Severus had an ornament or piece of jewellery containing tourmaline as a gemstone? Or perhaps he simply had a fondness for it? And the way Severus had looked into his eyes and then at his mouth. It had been almost…flirtatious. Of course, that was completely impossible. Severus and flirting didn't fit. Severus and flirting with a person he disliked so completely fit even less. His musings were interrupted by a loud roar of rage.

"POTTER!"

Chapter 18

CHAPTER 18

A/N: *Gaudy* belongs to me. However, if there is a gay bar of that name in real life, then it's a complete coincidence.

Harry looked up as he heard a sound of running footsteps and the hall door slam; Severus was eager to alleviate the itching situation as quickly as possible. His Ashwinder Patronus paid Harry a visit a few minutes later.

"BRAT!" Severus's voice roared out of its fanged mouth before it disappeared with an ominous crackle.

Harry rolled on the floor laughing. He had not had such a good laugh for a long time. When he encountered Severus in the library later, he was promptly cornered by his incensed husband, who had managed to apply a magical salve.

"A little contribution from those infernal Weasley twins?" he snarled.

"Yes," Harry smiled. "I can give you some. You could use them in the staff room."

Severus stared at him, a strange gleam in his eyes.

"How many have you got?"

"Oh, quite a lot. About thirty or so. Fred and George asked me to tell them about the results, but I'll exclude, er, your case."

Severus's eyes narrowed. The young wizard was still smiling roguishly. Severus had intended to rage at him about disrespect and immaturity, only to choke down his words as he considered what he himself had done to Harry – and not only after their marriage.

Moreover, the brat – no, young man – was offering to share his stock of pranks with him…

"Fred and George told me that if one casts a Revealing Charm on the surroundings, then one can see the itching powder and avoid it," Harry informed him, "just in case you're thinking of retaliating."

Severus raised a cool eyebrow.

"I think you underwent enough itching during your turquoise problem," he remarked blandly.

"That's why I used the Invisible Itch Bomb in retaliation."

"If you could kindly supply me with six bombs, Potter, then I would be much obliged to you." Severus said dryly, stepping away from Harry. Thoroughly confused at Severus's uncharacteristically mild behaviour, Harry went to fetch a couple of bombs. He made sure the handle of his wand was well within reach in case Severus tried to throw the bombs at him. He would try to put up a Shield Charm or use a Freezing Charm if Severus launched any missiles at him.

In the library, Severus took the bombs with a slender hand. As long as they were in their packets, they were visible. Unpack them, and one could feel but no longer see them in one's hand.

"Clever," Severus murmured, peeling back a portion of the wrapper.

"Are you going to use them on the students or your fellow-teachers?" Harry asked, half expecting to be accused of nosiness.

"I would not mind seeing Lucius Malfoy in acute discomfort," Severus replied softly. Harry stared.

"You're going to use those during a Death Eater meeting?" he gasped.

"They may come in useful," Severus said succinctly.

"But…Volde – I mean, You-Know-Who will-"

"I am perfectly capable of defending myself, Potter, in case you haven't noticed after all this time," Severus said in his usual snappy manner.

"You, uh, won't use them on Vo – You-Know-Who himself, will you?"

"Am I an imbecile, Potter?" Severus barked.

"You are the complete opposite," Harry said seriously.

Severus gave him a suspicious look, as if on the verge of using a slight dose of Legilimency to check whether Harry was being sarcastic or not.

Later that night, Dumbledore was forced to go to the hospital wing due to a dreadful itch attack which had unfortunately chosen his hind quarters as a battleground. Within a few seconds, however, the itching spread to even more awkward places, which, although no longer in a condition to provide him or anyone else with offspring due to age, were still highly valued by him.

Madam Pomfrey looked at the case with the maximum of professionalism before going to search for a magical salve.

"Ah, Severus. I should have expected some kind of revenge after arranging your marriage," Dumbledore murmured, scratching his buttock discreetly. He was not the only victim: Professor Moody clunked his way down to the hospital wing, his eyes (including the magical one) bulging due to paranoia and discomfort. Stern and composed Professor McGonagall was severely distracted during breakfast. Seconds later, a yowling tabby cat with spectacle markings around its eyes was rushing towards the hospital wing, stopping every now and then to rub its furry rump against a convenient suit of armour. Severus helped himself to some scrambled eggs and bacon. Dumbledore watched him with a tiny smile in his beard. He leant over to the Potions Master.

"My dear boy, I am looking forward to the next instalment, even though I didn't particularly enjoy my own predicament," he whispered confidentially.

"Hm," Severus said.

The news of three teachers succumbing to itch attacks spread through Hogwarts with its usual wildfire speed.

"How many bombs are remaining?" Harry asked Severus nonchalantly.

"Three," Severus said impassively, sweeping past him. Harry grinned. Severus the prankster. Who would have thought of it? On the other hand, he was a rather vindictive man. Severus stopped and turned to look at him, leaning casually against the doorframe.

"Are you free tomorrow night?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," Harry answered.

"Meet me at *Gaudy* at nine o'clock. I may be there earlier, but I'm not sure. Make sure you're at a quarter to nine to be on the safe side."

Gaudy was the name of the muggle bar Severus had taken Harry to. It struck him as ironic that solitary black-clad Severus Snape should have chosen a place bearing such an unsubtle name. But maybe the "opposites attract" cliché had actually turned out to be true for once.

The next night, Harry was sitting at a table in the bar, looking around nervously and checking his watch. Unknown to him, Severus was watching him from behind a wall, too skilled and well trained to need an Invisibility Cloak or Charm in such a situation. Severus smirked. Harry Potter had fought dragons and defied Voldemort more than once and yet he still managed to be nervous. He inched his way to the men's toilet and locked the door of his cubicle. He extracted a vial containing Polyjuice Potion and slipped a hair into it. He had managed to divest an attractive youth in the bar of a few hairs by

means of a clever Summoning Charm. The youth had patted his head and swatted at the air, blaming a non-existent insect for the slight twinge he had felt on his scalp. Severus had known that the youth would leave at eight-thirty to work at a cinema a few streets away – information he had picked up as a regular guest of the bar. Thus, there was no danger of twin youths once Severus had ingested the Potion. It was a very small dose and would last for about thirteen minutes.

The reason for this elaborate charade was simple, though decidedly sneaky. Severus felt inclined to test Harry's loyalty and views on marital fidelity when he, Severus, was not around.

Severus drank his Polyjuice Potion and waited until he had transformed. He adjusted his own clothes with magic to fit his new body before venturing forth. He approached the table at which Harry was sitting.

"Hey," he said casually.

Harry gave him a rather wary look.

"Hello," he answered.

"So, what's a cute guy like you doing here?" Severus asked in his disguise. His voice, however, retained his characteristic silky quality, except that it was not snide or sarcastic.

"I'm waiting for my husband," Harry said pointedly.

"Husband?" Severus asked with perfectly faked astonishment.

"We married in Canada," Harry said, raising his glass and sipping his drink.

"Oh, how romantic! Love at first sight, wasn't it?" Severus remarked.

Harry's acting was just as perfect as he replied:

"Definitely. There were sparks between us from the very beginning."

Harry was obviously doing his best to get rid of him politely. Severus was silent for a moment, appreciating the double meaning of Harry's statement. He knew that Harry was thinking of their very first Potions lesson and their mutually established hostility.

"Didn't I see you once long ago over here? I think you were sharing a table with a thin morose guy. I bet you didn't marry that stick," Severus said, feeling decidedly annoyed at having to resort to self-insult. But then, he did not have a very high opinion of himself anyway. He discovered himself looking into a pair of flashing green eyes; Harry pushed back his chair roughly.

"That thin morose stick happens to be my husband, you jackass," he said in a hiss worthy of Voldemort himself.

Severus simulated complete embarrassment and humiliation.

"Er…Oh…I see," he said. "Well…Uhm…Bye."

He fled, and, in a corner outside the bar, underwent the throes of the transformation back into himself. It was nine o'clock when Severus returned to Harry, a drink in his hand.

"Punctual, I see," he remarked, putting his glass on the table and sitting down.

"I was here fifteen minutes ago, like you told me to be," Harry replied snappily. He was still irritated.

"Did something happen?" Severus asked slyly.

"Yeah," Harry muttered, grinding his glass against the tabletop. "Some idiot tried hitting on me and refused to take the hint that I'm married."

"Well…I suppose he didn't view marriage as an obstacle. Not like you do, with your romantic views on fidelity."

Harry flushed.

"I simply like to think that I am responsible. I think I said so before. In this very bar."

There was a small silence.

"McGonagall and Moody tell me that you are doing well in your lessons. Shacklebolt is also pleased."

"They're good teachers," Harry observed. Severus laughed softly.

"Contrary to me," he murmured.

Harry remained composed.

"You don't exactly take pains to be liked by the students, Severus," he said frankly. "May I ask you why not?"

Severus shrugged.

"I've got to earn my living somehow, Potter. Do you think anyone else would engage someone with my kind of past?" Or appearance, he added mentally.

He noticed a man looking at Harry.

"Do you want to dance?" Severus asked Harry abruptly. Harry looked at him, surprised. Then he nodded timidly and got up, going over to the small dancing platform at the end of the room with Severus at his side.

"I, uh, I don't really know how to dance," he admitted.

"That much was obvious during the Yule Ball," Severus commented wryly. He himself had learnt that dancing was a good avenue for initiating more intimate encounters. A slow song was playing. He took Harry's hand in his, feeling Harry's wedding band nudge his fingers. He looked into the green eyes behind the glasses. A couple

of people were watching them. They stood out as an unusual couple: the tall older man and his small youthful partner, gazing at each other.

"Those were my toes, Potter," Severus murmured to him.

"Sorry," Harry whispered, mortified.

"Will you stop pinching my hand like a demented crab?" Severus asked.

"Do you always complain so much when you dance?" Harry said tersely, loosening his grip on Severus's fingers.

"I don't usually dance with such catastrophes on two legs," Severus answered.

"Then why did you ask me to dance? In fact, why did you ask me to come here in the first place?" Harry snapped. "Order of the Phoenix business?"

"No."

"Then why?"

Severus eyes suddenly narrowed and Harry felt him press something against his ribs.

"You didn't think you would get away with that itch bomb, did you, Potter?"

Harry felt a tickly sensation encircle his sides. It became stronger and turned into an itch.

"Severus, you didn't…!"

"I did."

Severus drew away while Harry tried not to scratch himself. It was of no use.

"Shit," Harry whispered, clawing at his side. He did not even pretend to walk away; he bolted from the dance-floor with the speed of light, heading for the toilet. Severus suppressed a smirk.

"Upset stomach," he explained to a man who had watched Harry's flight with understandable curiosity.

In the meantime, Harry was scratching his upper body frenziedly in his cubicle. In the end, he managed to stumble out of the cubicle, make sure the coast was clear and Apparate back to the edge of the Hogwarts grounds. Tripping and scratching, he ended up with Madam Pomfrey, who shook her head at the itch attacks which had been going on and promptly equipped him with the salve.

When Severus returned, a glowering Harry was waiting for him, tapping his foot with impatience.

"Now I know why you invited me out," he growled. With his wand, he made a cushion fly towards Severus and thump him on the head.

"What! You have the audacity to fling cushions at me? Just wait…"

He hurled the cushion back at Harry with a powerful non-verbal spell. It hit him with such force in the chest that Harry gasped. Summoning all his power, Harry levitated the remaining cushions from the sofa. They flew at Severus, who deflected them with a Shield Charm. Harry leapt aside quickly, ducking at the same time. He directed the cushions back at Severus.

The cushion duel went on with both parties showing equal resistance and skill until one cushion burst mid-air, showering them with feathers. They stared at each other breathing hard. Then Harry smiled.

"Feathers! Luna would look nice with feathers around her when she sits for me!" he exclaimed.

Severus rolled his eyes, cleared the mess and repaired the cushion with graceful flicks of his wand.

"I could imagine Miss Lovegood posing as a hen," he said unkindly. In spite of this, he did not protest when Harry brought Luna with him a few days later. Ginny was once again responsible for touch-ups, make-up etc. She had already woven delicate silver threads into Luna's long blond hair and given her a set of silvery robes to wear. Artificial feathers hovered around Luna as she sat on a cloth on the floor. Ginny had given her face an airbrushed look with very little powder, transparent lip gloss and the slightest touch of pale eye shadow. Severus witnessed the operations as he sat the sofa from behind the rim of his book. He seemed more interested in watching Harry's movements than in Luna posing as a model. When Ginny left for Quidditch training, Severus lowered his book, scrutinising Luna and Harry openly. Harry had his back towards Severus while Luna was facing, though not looking at, him. Severus's black eyes latched on to Harry, following the movements of his right hand as he sketched Luna with pale crayons, lingering on the curve of his bowed neck, wandering over his messy hair. They traced the lines of his figure just like Harry was tracing Luna's outline on paper. When Harry and Luna had finished their session, Severus rose, gave them a curt nod and left.

"Professor Snape is very interested in you," Luna observed with her usual directness.

Harry looked at her, taken aback.

"Er…Really?" he asked lamely. He had the feeling that Luna was very well aware of the fact that things between him and Severus were still difficult even a few months after their marriage.

"Oh yes. He couldn't take his eyes off you while you were sketching me. He was smiling a little now and then. It is rather sweet, isn't it?"

Chapter 19

CHAPTER 19

Christmas was approaching; a little less than two weeks were remaining. Harry whiled the time away going out with his friends on Hogsmeade weekends, visiting them in Gryffindor Tower, romping with the others in the snow or on his Firebolt, studying and practising for his lessons, sketching – and thinking frequently about Luna's words and Severus. Luna was far more observant than her dreamy appearance and mien implied. Still, her remark about Severus watching and smiling from time to time while Harry had drawn Luna's portrait had surprised him. Harry had never seen Severus smile without sarcasm or mockery. What had made him smile genuinely when he had watched Harry sketch? Harry could not find an answer to this question. He himself watched Severus discreetly, always being careful in case Severus caught him staring. Severus, too, made sure that Harry didn't notice his black eyes on him, for Severus often glanced at his young husband through the misty vapours of his potions, his eyes picking up details such as a spike of black hair hanging in his face, or the slight concentrated frown between his eyebrows as he worked, his tongue darting over his lips to moisten them, and the startling green of his eyes whenever he looked up. Harry often wore and worked in jeans, which was his favourite kind of trousers for casual wearing, and in a plain t-shirt. Robes suited him well, but Severus preferred him in muggle clothing. He found himself stealing glances at Harry's figure. Lucky brat, he thought cynically, blessed with good looks, married to a gaunt hook-nosed and ill-tempered stick of a man and persecuted by a perverted psychopathic wizard called Voldemort.

Severus had been summoned by Voldemort twice since the beginning of the term. Voldemort had fed on the fake memories of Severus slowly brainwashing Harry and turning him into his slave.

"He is still rather recalcitrant, Severus," he had hissed critically.

"It only adds to the pleasure, my Lord," Severus had explained suavely.

Voldemort had laughed.

"How wonderfully imaginative you are, my dear Severus!"

He had been pleased enough to let Severus go early and spare him the torture of the Cruciatus on the second occasion.

Severus had replied to Harry's questions with short, irritable and sarcastic answers after returning to Hogwarts, not understanding why Harry should be anxious about Severus's well-being ("Are you alright?" "I hope he didn't hurt you!" "You're looking so tired.").

It was a snowy evening when Severus was called for the third time by Voldemort. Harry was interrupted from wondering what he should get Severus for Christmas – he was still determined to somehow or the other find a way to make their relationship more amicable – by Severus marching off to the door of their rooms, wrapped in a cloak, his Death Eater's mask in his gloved hand.

"He has called you," Harry said, hurrying up to him.

Severus's lip curled.

"Obviously, husband of mine. I should be back in an hour or so."

"Take care of yourself," Harry said, suppressing the sting "husband of mine" caused him. It reminded him how much especially Severus resented their union and didn't seem willing to work on their relationship.

Severus's only answer was a derisive snort as he brushed past Harry, who bit his lip as the door closed behind the tall figure of the Potions Master. The cloak, however, gave him an idea. Severus had two travelling cloaks; one for the summer and another for the winter. The latter was in a sad state. No amount of magic could repair it

anymore, and Severus had grumbled about having to buy a new cloak and cast a Warming Charm on the thin summer cloak for the timebeing but had to renew it every time he went out.

Harry decided to read until Severus came back. An hour passed. Severus did not return. After half an hour, Harry began to get nervous. Dobby brought him dinner which he refused. He reassured his friend that the food was always splendid but that he was restless since his husband had not come back as yet. Ten minutes later, he was pacing up and down in the empty hall, and after another ten minutes, he was truly worried. Finally, an hour after Severus was supposed to have come back, Harry left their quarters, closing the door quietly so as not to disturb a napping Nessa, and went to Dumbledore's office.

"Harry! Is something wrong, my dear boy?" Dumbledore asked.

"Professor, I wanted to ask you if you know when Severus will be back?"

Dumbledore raised his hand and stroked his long white beard.

"I'm afraid I don't know, Harry."

"He's been away for nearly two hours. He said he would be back in an hour or so," Harry said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and twisting his hands, "he's never been away for so long…at least, not since we married…"

Dumbledore came round his desk and, placing both hands on Harry's shoulders, looked into the anxious green eyes.

"He will come back, Harry. Don't worry."

Harry sighed.

"I'm scared every time he leaves. I'm scared Voldemort will hurt him. He does hurt him. Severus is always so tired and pale when he

returns." His voice shook. "I…I think he uses the Cruciatus curse on him. I felt it through my scar the time before last…I didn't see it, but I knew that it was Severus he was hurting. He was in pain when he came back. He wouldn't talk to me."

Dumbledore squeezed his shoulders gently.

"Sit down, Harry, and have a lemon drop."

Harry knew that it was no use standing around and worrying. Sitting down and having a lemon drop wasn't any less or any more constructive.

"Thank you, sir."

He sat down and accepted the lemon drop the Headmaster gave him.

"You care for Severus. For his well-being."

Harry stopped sucking at the sweet. It wasn't a question. It was a statement. Dumbledore was smiling. Just then, there was a brisk tap-tap on Dumbledore's door. Dumbledore looked at a mirror-like object on his desk. He beamed, rose and opened the door himself.

"Severus! Please come in."

Harry leapt up from his chair and then blushed.

The cloaked figure of the Potions Master stepped inside the office.

"Harry came here because he was worried about you, Severus. He wanted to know if I knew when you were returning," Dumbledore smiled.

Severus didn't say anything. He simply looked at Harry.

"I suggest that you go down to your rooms and exchange your news," Dumbledore said, twinkling at them from behind his

spectacles.

The two wizards wished him good night and left.

"You were worried about me?" Severus asked Harry softly as they walked towards the dungeons.

"Yes, you were away for so long," he said, looking closely at his husband's face.

"I did not know that Voldemort would be holding a big dinner during which he questioned Lucius Malfoy about Draco's willingness to join the Death Eaters. After submitting Lucius to the Cruciatus curse, he demanded to know details concerning our abusive marriage. I gave him fake memories to feast upon."

"Our marriage is not abusive," Harry said loudly.

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"It is *supposed* to be abusive in the eyes of Voldemort, Harry," he pointed out, "also, you must admit that you did, ah, imply that I had abused you, if you recall the beginning of our marriage and the consummation of our blood bond."

Harry reddened. Severus never forgot hurtful things, and he felt unhappy that Severus remembered the ugly scenes between them during the first weeks of their marriage so vividly.

"And I apologised to you. Are you still mad at me because of that?"

"Why do you ask? Of what importance is it to you?"

Harry bit his lip, then responded:

"Because…your opinion is important to me. Because…you…are important to me."

"A spy and protector is always important and useful," Severus said. Harry realised that Severus had misunderstood his sentence. Perhaps he had even done so deliberately.

"No, no, I didn't mean important in that way. I mean, that is important, but I meant-"

Severus stopped walking and crossed his arms on his chest.

"Will you get to the point?"

"You are important to me as a person."

Severus uncrossed his arms and stared into Harry's eyes.

"Have you eaten?" he asked finally.

"I…No. I had no appetite."

"We will go back now and you will have dinner."

"Did Voldemort at least serve good food?" Harry asked seriously. To his surprise, Severus began to laugh merrily. The sound was uplifting.

"I don't think I have ever laughed at a sentence which contained the Dark Lord's name – until now," he said, smiling. Harry's heart skipped a beat.

"He didn't poison us – we're too useful for him. Everything was well cooked. We were in Malfoy Manor, the house elves did all the slogging."

"And he ended up torturing the host."

"Well…Yes."

"Did he hurt you?"

"Not this time."

"Is there really no way you can tell me when you'll be back?"

"Not without Voldemort knowing about it. It would awaken his suspicions. Now stop fretting. Has your appetite returned?"

"Yes."

They reached their quarters. Severus flung off his cloak. Harry watched it slide down his figure caressingly.

"Dobby!" he called. The little elf appeared with a smile.

"I believe Mr Potter refused his dinner?"

Dobby's ears drooped.

"He was too restless, Master Snape."

"He is no longer restless. Could you please bring him his dinner?"

"Of course!" Dobby squealed.

"Thank you, Dobby," Severus said genially. Dobby disappeared and Severus turned to Harry.

"I am going to have a bath, and you will eat."

He gave Harry another long look before leaving.

Chapter 20

CHAPTER 20

shogi: Yes, Severus is having a hard time producing those fake memories, and it's going to get harder…

He called me by my name, and he pronounced Voldemort's name, Harry mused as he ate dinner in his bedroom. Both in the same sentence, too…

" *It is* supposed *to be abusive in the eyes of Voldemort, Harry."*

He thought back to the consummation of their blood bond. How they had not had eye contact during the act. Would he have felt better if he could have looked into Severus's eyes? Or worse, seeing the loathing in them? Did Severus still loathe him? He had the feeling that Severus was used to sharing his rooms with him and was treating him with far less disdain. They had not argued for some time. He recalled the look Severus had given him when he had been in the process of explaining what a tourmaline was. Or the quick glances Severus would send his way when they were working together on a potion, with Harry cutting up some ingredient or the other and Severus stirring a complicated concoction in his cauldron, his thick black hair, velvety and soft ever since Dobby had arranged it on the day of the wedding and bonding ceremony, often tied back. When Severus moved, he did so with grace and fluidity. His tapering fingers were so agile that Harry was often astonished at the speed with which they handled Potions ingredients. At the same time, his fingers could be deliberately languid, moving slowly over the spines of books, or tracing his mouth when he was in deep contemplation. Harry would often catch a restless gleam in Severus's black eyes, hinting at the equally restless mind behind them, and he would wonder what Severus was thinking. Harry was becoming familiar with such characteristic gestures and habits; and he had discovered

tonight that Severus could laugh very pleasantly and that his smile was rather charming, softening the grimness of his thin and pale face. Harry also realised that Severus's eyes were an extremely deep dark-brown colour in the daylight or when bright artificial light was shining fully upon his face. He had made this discovery during their past arguments, when Severus had come close to him and stared threateningly into his eyes. He tried to imagine what Severus would have been like if he had not come from a broken home. Whether he would have smiled and laughed much more often...

After dinner, Harry tried to sketch a smiling Severus from partly his imagination, partly from the fresh memory of Severus laughing, but it didn't work. If he drew Severus, whether smiling or serious, then it would have to be the real thing, so to speak. He did not even have a photograph of his husband, and no pictures had been taken of their wedding. It seemed so wrong to him. Hermione and Ron had each other's animated pictures in their wallets. Harry sighed and crumpled up his botched sketches. He flicked them into the wastepaper basket, which emitted a sonorous burp. He grinned and wondered if Dumbledore had come up with the idea of adding this interesting acoustic effect to the wastepaper baskets. He turned to the task of writing letters to his friends and Ron's parents and siblings. He had given the twins detailed information on the pastilles and itching bombs. He was already looking forward to their next instalment. He wondered whether Severus had been serious about using itch bombs during a Death Eater meeting, and whether he had done so during Voldemort's dinner. He managed to ask Severus this question before they both went to bed; they come across each other in the library, Severus freshly showered.

"Well…What do you think, Harry? Did I use a bomb?" Severus asked him in return, staring into his eyes. Harry wished that it was he who could perform Legilimency; he could not guess the answer from Severus's body language, face or tone. He did, however, register the use of his first name again. Had his going to Dumbledore's office in a fit of anxiety about Severus's well-being actually touched something in the cynical Slytherin?

"How about a hint?"

"It is a yes or no question," Severus said, his eyes still locked with Harry's, who was starting to blush under such a keen gaze.

"You have got ten seconds to guess."

"Just one question: were all the Death Eaters invited?"

"Yes. All."

Harry gritted his teeth mentally at the thought of Bellatrix, who had killed his beloved godfather.

"You didn't use a bomb."

"And why do you think I didn't use one?"

"Uhm…because it would be an unnecessary risk to pull off a prank during a formal Death Eater dinner?"

"I forgot to mention that Peter Pettigrew was banished from the table for scratching himself in public."

"I guessed wrong!"

"Obviously."

"But I thought you had Malfoy in mind…?"

Severus leant towards him.

"People change their minds," he whispered, his breath slightly ruffling a strand of black hair on Harry's forehead. "Good night, Harry."

The next evening found Harry sketching busily in the hall. The art teacher was pleased with his progress and had declared Luna's portrait "a fine and delicate piece of work."

The students had been given magical easels which, apart from being collapsible like muggle ones, could be shrunk and carried around in one's bag or even pocket. Like the paint boxes, the easels were loaned to the students for the duration of the course and had to be returned for the next batch of students to use – the class was so popular that Dumbledore had decided to continue it for another term or two. Harry was just adding the finishing touches to the drawing – something he had been working on for two or three evenings – when the door opened silently, revealing Severus Snape, tired and irritable after grading piles of essays. His dark eyes lingered on Harry, and he slowly moved towards the young wizard. When Harry leant back, he edged closer and examined the drawing, hands behind his back. Harry looked up, pleased that his husband was taking in an interest in what he was doing. Severus was surprised at what he could see. Harry had sketched three round links which seemed to belong to a bracelet or necklace. One link was hooked into the other. The links had the shape of snakes, their mouths biting their own tails, thus forming metal circles with their bodies.

Severus immediately recognised the ouroboros-motive of the tail-biting snake. He slowly shifted his eyes to Harry. He had never regarded him as particularly original or imaginative – rather the opposite.

"You have skill and imagination," he remarked. Apart from the fact that Harry had drawn the animal which was the symbol of his House, he added silently in thought.

Harry blinked, overwhelmed by what he considered an enormous compliment from Severus Snape.

"Thank you," he said, sounding a little guarded.

Severus studied the sketch again.

"That patch of wall could do with some filling up."

He pointed at a large well-lit space opposite the fireside.

"There," he said abruptly. "It would fit."

Harry swallowed.

"You want to…hang it up?"

"Yes."

"Uh, it's only an amateur sketch…"

"There should be enough light on that wall," Severus continued, ignoring him.

Harry touched his hand, finally getting his attention.

"I…Well…Thank you, Severus. I am happy you like it."

"I think I clearly implied that the walls do look bare in places. Your artistic creation is just the right size to cover the deficiency," Severus remarked stiffly. Harry smiled inwardly. It was Severus's way of expressing that he liked the picture.

Within two days, Harry's sketch was showcased in an elegant frame and fastened to the wall with a powerful Sticking Charm. Severus's gesture pleased and moved Harry deeply. The result was that the atmosphere in the dungeons improved significantly. Conversations became less halting and more genuine. Severus discovered that his young husband had many notions and ideas which people of his age did not usually have. He now acknowledged that Harry had had to grow up very early without love or a real family, more dismayed than pleased by his fame, missing out on a normal happy childhood and adolescence. And yet he was still innocent verging on naïve in some matters – which Severus found secretly charming. When Hagrid gave them a Christmas tree for their quarters a few days before Christmas, Harry was nearly wild with joy, clapping his hands and looking up spells to decorate it while Severus shook his head and resignedly cleaned the trail of pine needles leading to Harry's bedroom and back with a spell.

Chapter 21

CHAPTER 21

The Christmas holidays arrived with a thick blanket of soft white snow, glittering decorations, carols and pine trees in the Great Hall. A lull settled over Hogwarts as most of the students went home to their families over the holidays, including Ginny and Luna. Hermione and Ron had gone to Paris for a Christmas vacation. Nessa's picture was decorated with tinsel – much to Severus's disapproval.

"It looks absurd," he said to Harry.

"Christmas is the time of absurdities, among other things," Harry said cheerfully, adjusting the tinsel. Nessa, in order to remain perfectly diplomatic, reverted to the simple solution of pretending to be fast asleep. Her beady eyes, which, like most snakes, possessed transparent protective scales instead of eyelids, stared blankly into emptiness. When she winked, she accomplished this action by narrowing her eye to a slit.

Inside the hall of Severus's and Harry's quarters, the Christmas tree was glittering near the hearth. Harry had bought a whole lot of decorations and a very pretty crib in Hogsmeade. He had also managed to talk Severus into helping him to decorate the tree on Christmas Eve.

"This tree is for both of us, so we should both decorate it," Harry pointed out.

"It is a waste of my hall space," Severus grumbled.

"Grinch," Harry quipped. "Will you please hold this garland?"

Severus's view was suddenly obscured by a furry silvery boa which was dumped around his shoulders by his impatient spouse.

"This is atrocious," he said snidely.

"So is your festive behaviour," Harry replied, fastening candleholders to the branches. Severus decided to be silent. Neither of them had had much opportunity to decorate Christmas trees in the past. It was the very first time for Severus that he was going to celebrate Christmas with someone in his own quarters. He usually whiled the Christmas holidays away in a state of complete cynicism, more interested in the annual suicide rates around the festive season than in the decidedly clichéd image of family warmth and affection. His parents had never bothered about Christmas or exchanging gifts, and, least of all, about exchanging affection. He didn't know what it was like to decorate a tree with someone else. Harry had naturally been excluded from all festive activities by the Dursleys until he had started spending Christmases with the Weasleys and decorating the tree with them. He had a family in the Weasleys, and he regarded Severus, too, as family. He was quite used to Severus's waspishness and short temper and was learning to appreciate the finer qualities of the man, which, ironically enough, Severus was anxious to hide, regarding them as weaknesses.

"Okay, it's ready," Harry said as he levitated the angel onto the very tip of the tree.

The two wizards stood back and admired their work.

"Quite passable," Severus said.

Harry smiled at him.

"Now all we need is to dress you up as Santa Claus."

Severus leant towards to him.

"I would like to see you try," he murmured, gazing into the sparkling green eyes, finding it impossible to believe that Harry Potter was actually teasing him – and that he, sullen Severus Snape, did not mind. Harry was thoroughly exploring his playful and mischievous

side, even bringing snowballs from the grounds after decorating the tree and threatening to throw them at Severus. This lead to the casting of a Waterproof Spell on their quarters (but not on their persons) and to a snowball fight, Severus gazing at Harry with narrowed eyes, intent on not missing any of his moves. Kingsley Shackebolt, however, had trained Harry outstandingly, and Harry employed his Duelling skills on this occasion, on the lookout for a range of non-verbal spells with which Severus tried to distract him or with which he attempted to manoeuvre the snowballs around. In the end, both of them were wet with snow in their robes and hair.

"I won," Harry announced.

"You didn't! Your snowball crumbled in mid-air," Severus said cuttingly.

"It got you anyway."

"Mine hit you at the same time."

"It didn't, yours got me just a second after mine landed on your chest!" Harry said.

"Harry Potter, it did not do anything of the sort."

Harry burst out laughing at their mutual stubbornness. It occurred to Severus that laughter in the dungeons was a rarity – and that it sounded very nice. He was still deciding whether he should explore or drive away this thought when Harry cast a Drying Spell on both of them and went back to his bedroom. He returned with his sketching pad and began to draw a couple of the decorations which were glittering on the tree. Severus withdrew quietly. Seeing Harry sketch seemed strangely intimate to him, something that he did not wish to intrude on, even though Harry did not seem to mind at all if Severus was nearby.

On Christmas day, Harry and Severus breakfasted together in their quarters. Dinner would be had with the staff and the few students

who were staying at Hogwarts. Harry had been pleasantly surprised by Dobby (for whom he had bought a lot of socks) announcing that he and Severus would be having breakfast in the hall instead of each one eating his meal in the seclusion of his own room. Dressed in last year's Weasley jumper, Harry and Severus shared the handsome glass and steel table in the hall. After Severus's thorough ignoring of his birthday, Harry did not expect anything from his husband for Christmas. He was happy enough that Severus had helped him decorate the tree and, moreover, had sacrificed his very highly valued privacy in order to eat at the same table with Harry. He had dispatched Hedwig and some school owls with gifts for his friends and all the people who were close to him. Severus, for his part, searched Harry's face for the expectant look so many people had when they were wondering about what gifts were waiting for them underneath the tree. The young man looked happy, as if he was not longing for anything more than what he already had. When breakfast was over, Severus got up from the table and nodded at the tree.

"You have got gifts, Harry," he said impassively.

It's already a gift that you're calling me Harry, Severus, Harry thought with an inward grin.

"So do you – let's unpack Mrs Weasley's gifts together," he said, handing Severus a fat parcel; Molly Weasley considered Severus as a family member because of his marriage to Harry and had sent him several packets with homemade delicacies and, much to Harry's amusement, a black jumper with a green S on the front.

"Aren't you going to wear it?" Harry asked. Severus looked at the jumper, then at Harry, and back again. He was wearing trousers and a shirt instead of robes. He discarded the latter and pulled on the jumper, appreciating Molly's gesture of kindness rather than the actual gift.

"See, now we suit," Harry laughed, who had just unpacked his new Weasley jumper.

"On a symbolic level," Severus commented dryly, "now unwrap your other gifts."

"No, I'll unwrap mine afterwards-"

"Unwrap yours first," Severus repeated, waiting until Harry had finished with all his gifts. He noticed that Harry carefully placed the cards and notes which came along with them in a small pile, saving them up for a second reading.

"This is for you," he said, leaving the sofa and pressing a square package into Harry's hands.

Harry stared at him.

"You…got me something?" Then, hastily, as if afraid that he had sounded rude: "It is really…sweet of you, Severus, and I know that you don't have much time."

"Open it, see if you like it and thank me afterwards if it meets your needs," Severus said curtly. Harry unpacked the gift while Severus watched him closely. An exquisite large box made out of polished dark wood emerged; it was a paint box, containing various kinds of pencils, ranging from paintbrushes to graphite sticks and crayons, both of the muggle and the wizarding type. Harry knew that it must have been expensive and taken a good deal of thought and searching.

Harry looked into Severus's black eyes. There was a funny lump in his throat.

"I…It's wonderful," he said at last when he managed to find his voice. He put his arms around Severus's neck and gave him a firm hug. Severus did not react for a moment. Then, awkwardly, in a manner which indicated that he was not used to either receiving or giving hugs, he embraced Harry, noting how warm the young wizard was and how perfectly he fit in his arms.

"Thank you," Harry said, drawing back and reddening, running his palm across the lid. His eyes were shining.

"You're welcome. I felt that it would be useful since you show promise in the domain of sketching and drawing," Severus answered a bit stiffly, "and I discussed various types of paint boxes with your art teacher."

"I got something for you, too," Harry said timidly, handing him a package.

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"That is kind of you," he said, as if he did not quite know what to say.

"Open it," Harry smiled, gaining courage from Severus's surprise at both the hug and his gift. He watched Severus unwrap it as keenly as Severus had watched Harry. The habitual mask of harshness or blankness dropped from Severus's face as he unfolded the beautiful dark-green travelling cloak. It was embroidered with a silver pattern around the hem.

"Uh, I hope you like it," Harry said, "I had it commissioned for you and measured your other cloak to give to the seamstress. You said that your other cloak was falling apart."

Severus didn't answer immediately; he was still absorbed in the cloak, touching the material reverently and feasting his eyes upon it. Finally, he looked up.

"Thank you very much, Harry," he said softly. He seemed to hesitate; then he stretched out his hand and gave Harry a small pat on the cheek. He rose to his feet and wrapped the cloak around his tall figure, draping the hood over his head.

"Wow! It looks great!" Harry exclaimed. "Does it fit well?"

Severus took Harry's hand, making him stand up too. To Harry's astonishment, Severus led Harry into his bedroom and to the full-length mirror of his cupboard. Harry was delighted. Severus drew back his hood. He looked striking with his black hair tumbling over his shoulders and down the cloak.

"It is beautiful," he whispered. Harry went crimson.

Severus took his hand again and they returned to the hall. They separated as they sat down on the sofa.

"It was like the day I bought my wand," Severus told him. "It was one of the few happy days I can remember."

"I feel the same way about your gift," Harry said. "Merry Christmas, Severus."

"Merry Christmas, Harry."

Harry inaugurated his new paint box that very evening after dinner, sitting on the sofa and gazing at Severus, who was reading.

Severus was Lupin's age, in the full flower of adulthood. Suffering and life's harshness had hardened his features. Now, however, his face was relaxed and looked more its age. The long dark hair was loose, falling freely over his shoulders and back. The proud lines of his nose and high cheekbones reflected the forceful will behind his large black eyes. The eyebrows were fine and slender. Harry knew how much Severus could express with the slightest raising of only one eyebrow. He was not handsome, but Harry nevertheless liked the sight of his face and thought him attractive. He could not imagine him in any other way. He looked at the full dark eyes again.

"Why are you staring at me?" Severus asked abruptly, suddenly turning his face.

"I like looking at you," Harry said without thinking. Severus's slender eyebrows climbed up his forehead, and he stared at Harry, who went

very red.

"Indeed?"

Was there a way to describe how he liked watching the firelight flicker over Severus's face, or that, very simply, Severus's face was becoming something important to him?

"Would you allow me to sketch you?" Harry asked.

Severus raised his eyebrows again.

"You may keep the sketch afterwards, if you wish."

"If you think that I make an appropriate drawing subject…"

"I do. May I draw you now?"

Severus's mouth quirked slightly.

"Do I need to strike a pose?"

"No, you've just got to be…natural. Reading…Or just sitting. Well… without moving around too much."

"In that case – go ahead," Severus said languidly, a glint of amusement in his eyes.

Harry went to fetch his drawing materials, already thinking of the best angle from which to draw Severus. He chose a graphite pencil, fetched a large sheet of special paper and a broad piece of smooth cardboard to serve as a base.

He returned and sat down at the table, which gave him a perfect view of Severus's face and figure. The setting for the interplay between light and shadow was ideal.

Soon, he was as absorbed in his drawing as Severus was, or seemed, in his reading. There was no sound except for the

occasional rustle when Severus turned a page and the soft scratching of Harry's pencil. Harry chewed at his lip as he traced Severus's long hair, trying to give it as much of a soft velvety texture as his pencil and non-professional skill would allow. At last, he was finished with the general sketch and ready to start with the little details, adding a line here and there, fine-tuning the shading, emphasising the curves of Severus's mouth and neck, making the lowered eyelid more shadowy. He leant back, smiling. Severus looked up.

"Are you done?" he asked.

"Yes."

"May I indulge in narcissistic admiration?"

The dry request made Harry laugh.

"Yes, of course."

Severus rose gracefully and approached Harry and the drawing. He examined it for a few minutes without comment.

"May I keep it?" he said at last.

Harry nodded, pleased. He wrote his initials and the date in the left-hand bottom corner of the sketch.

"Thank you," Severus said, taking the picture in his slender hands.

Chapter 22

CHAPTER 22

On the day after Christmas, Severus studied Harry's sketch for a long time as he sat in the library. It was a postcard-morning; more snow had fallen during the night, and two of the students who were remaining at Hogwarts over the holidays had gone out into the grounds for a battle of snowballs. Harry and Severus were comfortably tucked away in the dungeons. Severus bent over the sketch. Harry had caught the angles of his face, the length of his tapering fingers, the atmosphere of the setting very well. It was a sketch, but there were details which surprised him – a tendril of hair brushing his right cheek, the glimmer of blackness underneath his lowered eyelid, the shading of his haughty nose…His sharp profile seemed to contrast with the softness of the gentle light which illuminated him, his book and the sofa on which he was sitting in the picture. He turned his attention to Harry's signature. A simple H and a P followed by the day, month and year, scribbled discreetly in a corner. He had been very pleasantly surprised by Harry's gift. Or rather, that Harry had got him something at all. He had treated him miserably for his birthday, after all. Severus actually felt his cheeks grow warm with shame. They became even warmer because it was simply not like Severus Snape to have a bad conscience concerning Harry Potter's birthday, especially when taking into account that he had wished several times that the brat had never been born…except that he no longer felt that way about him. In fact, his quarters seemed much homelier with Harry occupying them... Severus frowned and put the sketch away.

Later, when they had lunch together, Severus watched Harry broodingly. Harry was happy that they were starting to have their meals together and was eating with good appetite. Severus, on the other hand, was wondering why Voldemort had to target a blooming young man like Harry Potter. Severus thought of the night they had consummated their blood bond. Seeing Harry lying on his bed with

his lower body bare, exposed and struggling to hide his terror at being forced into such sudden and unwelcome intimacy. Severus had told him to lie down on his stomach so that neither of them would have to bear the added torture of having to avoid each other's eyes or look at each other's faces. Severus had seen the way his fingers had been clenched throughout the act, digging into the pillow. His face darkened. Then that choked sob when it was over. What if he had done things differently? Spoken more reassuringly to Harry? Touched his shoulder or hand in order to calm him? Or would that have made things worse? Maybe Harry would have recoiled from his touch. Their relationship had been extremely unpleasant at first, to say the least. If Harry managed to live through all the huge obstacles and challenges which were still awaiting him, would he be able to fall in love after his forced union with Severus? Severus had a cynical and scathing view of love; he had decided ages ago that he was not meant to love or be loved. Harry was attractive in many ways. And he, Severus, had ruined his first sexual experience for him. And broken his arm, too. And Harry had just the same gone and bought him an expensive cloak. He had hugged him as well. Severus could not remember ever being hugged. Dumbledore had squeezed his shoulders at the very most – that was all he had known about friendly physical gestures until Harry had hugged him. He could still feel Harry's unruly hair tickling his cheek and his arms around his neck. He could still see the sparkle in his green eyes. And that smile. Harry liked to smile. He sometimes smiled when he was sketching, probably without being aware of it. It was a dreamy smile which made Severus wonder what was going through Harry's mind. Eyes and lips like a green and red tourmaline, Severus mused.

Harry excused himself, got up and went over to the sideboard to fetch a tangerine. Severus followed him with his eyes.

"Would you like a tangerine?" Harry asked him.

"Yes, please," Severus answered.

"Catch," Harry said, raising his hand.

"I don't appreciate food being thrown around in our quarters."

"You're just saying that because you don't want to miss," Harry said shrewdly.

Severus's eyes narrowed.

"Aim properly," he growled.

The tangerine flew towards him in a graceful arc. Severus managed to catch it, but the fruit slid out of his fingers and into his lap.

"Ha! Missed!" Harry said.

"Your aim is atrocious. Thank goodness you're no longer on the Gryffindor Quidditch Team," Severus grumbled.

"Trying to save face, aren't you?" Harry said nonchalantly as Severus picked up the tangerine, peeling it deftly with his long fingers. He replied to Harry's teasing question with a snort.

Harry's mouth quirked, and he went back to the table. They ate their tangerines in comfortable silence.

"What would you like to do on your birthday?" Harry asked suddenly.

Severus looked at him expressionlessly.

"Why are you asking? It is Christmas season, not my birthday, in case you have not consulted the calendar as yet."

"It will soon be your birthday. So what would you like to do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," Severus repeated tersely, transferring the tangerine peels to the wastepaper basket with a non-verbal spell and pointing

gesture with his left hand.

"What about New Year?" Harry asked persistently.

"I do not believe in countdowns, Champaign and all that clichéd nonsense," Severus answered in a bored tone, "and I am amazed that you still haven't realised that I am not fond of social gatherings."

If Severus had hoped that he would spent an uneventful 31st December, then he was mistaken. The Weasley twins sent Harry a lot of New Year gags – and Voldemort chose the afternoon to summon him via the Dark Mark.

Severus immediately got ready and put on his cloak – the one Harry had given him – and turned to look at his husband's face.

The green eyes were grave and worried behind the spectacles.

"Take care of yourself," the youth said.

"Haven't I always done that?" Severus said, but his tone was without sarcasm; it was even gentle. Harry didn't respond, merely continuing to gaze at him. Severus placed his hand briefly on the messy hair before leaving.

Fortunately, Harry didn't have to wait for as long as last time. Severus was back within half an hour. Harry was nevertheless shocked; Severue was extremely pale, and he brushed past Harry without a world, heading for the bathroom. He came out with water on his lips. He was still ghastly pale.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked.

Severus stared at him glacially.

"I am perfectly fine with supplying scenarios where I am raping my husband many times while the Dark Lord masturbates mentally, seeing as that he is incapable of doing so physically."

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered, placing his hand on Severus's.

"What for?"

"For making you go through all this."

"It is my job."

"Suffering like this shouldn't be your job," Harry said.

Severus stared into Harry's green eyes.

"Tell me. What did you feel like when we consummated our blood bond? Don't tell me that you didn't feel like you were being raped. That you don't hold it against me, or don't want to see me suffer-"

Harry interrupted Severus by taking his hands in his. Severus fell silent.

"What did *you* feel like?" he asked softly. "We discussed this once. We were forced to do it."

"And I took away something very personal from you. You could not decide to whom to give it to. You had to give it to me, against your will."

"Severus…" Harry squeezed Severus's hands gently. "I knew that it was expected of me and of you. We said yes to the marriage and to the bonding. We could have backed out. Things were very different back then between us. We couldn't talk like we're talking now. It was easy for me to accuse you of forcing me, especially since…well… you were on top. It wasn't your fault."

He flushed, and the dark eyes searched his green ones again. Why on earth did the young man have to be so innocent and so perceptive sometimes?

"Severus, do you feel guilty?"

Severus nodded curtly. It was a hard admission to make, a big step to reveal part of his feelings to Harry.

"I felt guilty, you know. Once I had calmed down and spoken with Hermione, I often thought of what you must have felt during the consummation," Harry confessed.

"You were lying on my bed, only seventeen years old," Severus said flatly, "completely exposed. I had to…take you. Like you were a piece of meat. I hated myself and I hated you. But you had to be the determined Gryffindor you are, didn't you?"

He pressed Harry's hands.

"You wouldn't give up. You refused to stay away from me. We match each other in determination, Harry."

"In other things, too," Harry said. They gazed at each other.

"Were you drawing?" Severus inquired finally.

"How did you know?"

"You have got charcoal on your nose," Severus said.

Harry laughed and rubbed at his nose.

"No, over here. Wait," Severus said exasperatedly, rubbing at the corner of Harry's nose until the mark had gone.

"Thank you, Severus. I'm enjoying your gift, as you can see."

"There is no need to try and paint your face. Your natural charms are quite sufficient," Severus murmured, retiring to the sofa while Harry blushed again.

Chapter 23

CHAPTER 23

A/N: I have created a blog (cf. bottom of my profile page) for Snarry! You may submit your comments if you wish (no flames, of course!) AND vote in the poll over there for the kind of plot you fancy for my fourth Snarry story. Okay, so this is a small and rather short chapter for you. I am in the final stages of writing my Master's thesis, and I got so carried away during the past few days that I wrote more than foreseen and had a little time to write this up. Chapter 24 will be up after the 22nd November; I won't get lucky again even if I get carried away a second time. Thanks for being so patient and understanding that I can't post regularly at the moment. Je vous adore.

Harry rubbed his temples tiredly. He was wondering what to get for Severus's birthday. The inspiration for the cloak which he had given Severus for Christmas had happened to come at the right time and because Severus had been complaining about his old cloak. Harry could not recall Severus expressing a wish for something he needed – unless it was a wish for capable students. Not an evening went past when Severus did not make an acid comment about the students' lack of talent, attention, concentration etc. It was the same on this evening. Severus swept inside the dungeons in a state of complete irritation.

"Well, you are rather strict, Severus," Harry observed gently.

"I seem to recall that your Potions brewing abilities are not exactly impressive, husband of mine," Severus drawled casually.

"Will you stop calling me that?"

"Calling you what?"

"'Husband of mine'."

Severus bent a little.

"Aren't you my husband?"

"You meant it sarcastically."

"I enjoy sarcasm. So should you."

Harry smiled a little.

"I can't really imagine you without sarcasm," he admitted.

" *Your natural charms are quite sufficient."* Harry could hear Severus's comment in his mind, feel his arms around him when they had hugged on Christmas. There had been no sarcasm in the comment…

Severus, in the meantime, was studying Harry's smile.

Now that he was used to Severus and his ways, Harry smiled and laughed a lot. The dull dungeons became alive as soon as Harry slipped into their rooms. Severus valued his presence but never said so to Harry. Instead, he preferred to show his appreciation in ways which did not require words. Touching Harry's shoulder, arm or hand, or even resting his hand briefly on Harry's messy hair – gestures which meant a lot to Harry, more than Severus could imagine.

He now shared his quarters willingly with Harry, though Harry never stepped into his bedroom and rarely went into his laboratory; and if he did, he always knocked. He liked talking to his young husband, who was a good listener and good questioner – maturity had brought patience and pensiveness to Harry. And, of course, there were Harry's sketches and drawings. Severus liked to watch Harry at work. Harry even managed to coax forth Severus from his laboratory and involve him in games like Snakes and Ladders or Wizard's Scrabble. Both of them had never had anyone to play with when they

were small. It was as if they were catching up together on what they had missed out in their childhood.

Severus's birthday had never been celebrated at home. Later, at Hogwarts, his fellow-teachers had always sent him a big card signed by all of them as a polite gesture. Dumbledore would go a step further and give Severus a gift – usually something rare, expensive and very useful. Even then, Severus would tell himself that Dumbledore was only trying to keep his spy happy. Who could possibly like him, Severus Snape? However, he knew that Dumbledore, with his astonishing capacity of seeing the good in nearly everyone, regarded him as a son. Dumbledore would often invite him for tea, or walk with him in the grounds, talking to him about things which did not have the remotest connection with his work as a spy. He therefore did not expect any birthday celebration, and in any case he hated events and gatherings; so when he left his bedroom, ready to teach classes, he had actually forgotten that it was his birthday – a clear crisp January day. He was reminded by Harry.

"Happy birthday, Severus," he said, smiling cheerfully.

Severus stared at him for a moment, then he snorted.

"Birthday," he muttered contemptuously, brushing past Harry, whose smile only widened.

After class, he took tea with Dumbledore, who gave him his gift – a brand-new wizarding chess set of the rather pricey sort. Severus was a chess devotee; Dumbledore and he had spent quite a few sessions locked in mortal combat over protesting pawns. Severus had given up on Harry as a chess partner. The strategies and tactics Harry had learnt during his Duelling lessons with Kingsley Shacklebolt had stubbornly refused to be transferred to a chessboard.

"How are you and Harry getting on, Severus?" Dumbledore asked after Severus thanked him.

"It is satisfactory," Severus said, "we consider each other's presence fairly tolerable."

"That is good to hear. Is he giving you any trouble?"

He is giving me many opportunities to smile, Severus thought with a warmth with was new to him.

"None at all, which is frankly quite amazing."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled.

"I have observed that you are becoming friends."

Severus did not say or do anything. It was a silent agreement with Dumbledore, but he felt it would be embarrassing to admit it verbally.

After Severus had left, Dumbledore turned to the phoenix.

"It's time Severus got some sunshine in the dungeons, Fawkes," he said, scratching his pet's feathery neck. Fawkes began to sing.

Severus was welcomed by the sight of a birthday cake on the hall table and by Harry, who deposited a package in his arms as soon as he stepped inside their rooms.

"Just something small," he said. His cheeks were red.

Severus found his voice.

"It really wasn't necessary, Harry," he said, trying to sound detached and casual.

"Unwrap it," Harry said.

"Hm…" Severus hummed and examined the packet for a few seconds before opening it carefully, as if savouring the procedure. Harry watched him nervously.

Severus drew out a large book. On opening it, he discovered that it consisted entirely of Harry's artwork. There were sketches Harry had made of him brewing a potion, drawings of potions ingredients, scenes of the Hogwarts grounds, a close-up of Severus's own hand…

"Uhm, I know it's nothing really practical or special, but I thought you'd like it. You gave me a lot of inspiration, Severus." He smiled a little.

Severus closed the book slowly and caressed the cover with his hand. Harry noticed the gesture and knew at once that his gift was a huge success.

"Thank you, Harry. I like it very much," he said, placing his hand on Harry's shoulder and looking into his eyes. What a long way we have come, you and I, Harry Potter. That in itself is a gift, he mused silently.

"There's something else. You'll probably think it sentimental or whatever, but I've got to say it. I want to say 'thank you' for what you've done and are doing to protect me," he said somewhat shyly but clearly in a tone which revealed that he was not ashamed to thank Severus.

Severus reached out with a spontaneity which came as a surprise to himself and put his arm around Harry's shoulders, drawing the youth to him.

"It's the first time I'm having a birthday cake…Well, apart from Albus's chocolate monstrosity." He smiled a little.

Harry put his arms around Severus, closing his eyes. Severus's voice floated in close proximity to his ear.

"If anyone had told me that I would find you tolerable a few months ago, you impossible Gryffindor brat, then I would have hexed that person's tongue off."

"Only tolerable?" Harry asked, drawing back a little and grinning up at Severus. The man's face was completely different from the impassive or sour expression which usually dulled his features. The black eyes were quickened with life, and the thin rigid mouth, frequently compressed to a hard line or curled with scorn, was curved in a genuine smile.

"Very tolerable. Does that sound satisfying enough for his fastidious Majesty?" Severus asked dryly.

Harry laughed. The only other person besides Albus to laugh in the dungeons, Severus mused.

"It is…quite passable," Harry responded, using one of Severus's favourite assessments.

Severus touched Harry's forehead gently with the back of his hand and opened the book of sketches again. He saw that Harry had included another sketch of the flask containing their bonding blood. Severus felt a strange gladness that it was Harry he was protecting. He looks like his father, except for those eyes…and his nature is… sweet, Severus thought. The irony of pushing a kind-natured youth into a union with the worst-tempered person within miles! But maybe it was one of the reasons why Albus Dumbledore had been so insistent about a marriage between them…And somehow the persistent Gryffindor had managed to go beyond scratching at the tenacious surface of Severus's protective armour.

Chapter 24

CHAPTER 24

A/N: Dear all, I decided not to make you (and me) wait until tomorrow evening. Here's chapter 24! It is inspired by "The Bad Color" from "The Village"-soundtrack. Please check my blog *The Snarry Files* for more information on update rhythms (probably 3-4 times a week) and Snarry musings. The URL of the blog is indicated as my homepage and is also at the bottom of my profile page. And now for the really important "news": Thanks a million for being so patient and encouraging while I wrote my paper! I hope it gets accepted and receives a good mark…I had a lot of support from my family and from you and your reviews :-) Okay, back to the Potions Master and his husband.

Even in the dead of winter, Harry went out for broom rides or walked briskly in the grounds to keep himself toned and exercised. Indoors, he worked on his sketches and was encouraged by Professor Mukherjee who informed him that he possessed a true gift. One day, Harry decided to sketch Nessa. The snake curled herself around her pestle with great care as she posed for Harry. Severus, slightly annoyed that he could not open the door (this would have involved dislodging Nessa's picture while Harry sketched her), decided to watch the procedure, standing next to Harry while the young man sketched Nessa with chalk pencils.

"A picture of a picture," Severus commented; then, glancing at Nessa:

"Vain creature."

"I asked her to pose," Harry said, smiling while Nessa feigned polite deafness.

"How about a self-portrait?"

"Why should I draw myself?" Harry asked, frankly surprised.

"How do you view yourself? It does not have to correspond to your actual appearance."

"A portrait of self-perception?"

"Yes."

"Uhm, I actually drew a picture of how I think –well, thought – you perceive me. It was in my fifth year, after Occlumency."

"And what did you draw?"

"My father," Harry said.

There was a little silence as both felt the truth of the words.

Severus's face was impassive.

"Do you still have this intriguing sketch?"

"No, I threw it out after Christmas."

Another silence.

Nessa watched them shrewdly.

"Do you still perceive me as-"

"James Potter?" Severus finished his sentence. He studied Harry for a few moments.

"You resemble him strongly. But you are not him."

"Is that a good or a bad thing? Or both?" Harry asked.

Severus smiled slightly and hooked his index finger underneath Harry's chin.

"A good thing."

Harry smiled as well; then, with a quick flick of his hand, he painted a streak on Severus's haughty nose.

"Harry Potter!" Severus thundered, his habitual scowl back on his face while Harry laughed.

"Brat," the Potions Master added. Harry reached up and wiped the smudge away with his palm.

"Potter!"

Nessa was displaying marvellous composure. Her tail was twitching slightly, however.

Severus grabbed one of Harry's chalk pencils from the chair. The next moment, Harry was sporting a line on his cheek. Harry snatched another piece of chalk. They circled each other, pencils held like swords. Harry carefully conjured a protective eye-shield for both of them, which Severus tested before they started "fencing". Nessa forgot her posture and hung down from her pestle, eyes following the contestants beadily.

The playful game ended when Harry Disarmed Severus. Their faces were full of colourful streaks. They looked at each other. Harry smiled. Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Such childishness," he said, but his tone was teasing. "Let us go inside to remove this mess from our faces."

The cream Severus had used on Harry a few months ago was summoned.

"A Scourgifying Charm makes the skin like paper," Severus observed as he applied the cream to Harry's face. Harry stood still, feeling the

long skilled fingers massage his face lightly.

"May I?" he asked, holding his hand out for the cream.

"If you wish," Severus said, sounding amused.

Harry dipped his finger into the pot of cream and started with Severus's jaw, then proceeded to his cheeks, nose and forehead. They maintained eye contact throughout the operation.

"You really ought to think of going into cosmetics potions, Severus," Harry remarked after their faces were clean.

"Most definitely not," Severus growled.

"Why not? You can concoct some marvellous stuff and I can do the artwork for the layout and labels."

Severus's mouth quirked just the tiniest bit.

"We could offer free samples around the school," Harry added enthusiastically, "and I'm sure Dumbledore will support us in our unique endeavour."

"Unique endeavour? Albus?"

"Snape Deluxe, special skincare range-"

"Potter! You are raving!" Severus barked.

"Oh, it's great! I can ask the Weasley twins-"

"POTTER!"

"Severus, honestly, this cream is wonderful. It's not at all standard. I saw the recipe for it in the library; *you* had written it."

Severus looked as if he preferred creating products which would make people's skins erupt into pustules and other unpleasant things.

Harry was humming.

"…a special care range for men. The skincare market targets women most of the time, it's not right-"

"Harry Potter, I am thinking of a Silencing Charm."

Harry tugged at Severus's hands.

"Come on, Severus. Just an attempt."

"I am not here to attend to people's skin problems," Severus said acidly, "we are members of the Order of the Phoenix, not members of the Order of Skin Disorders."

"Maybe you'll change your mind after you've thought about it," Harry said cheekily, settling himself on the sofa and drumming his fingers on the arm of the furniture.

Severus rolled his eyes. However, it was true that the cream was very well received. Madam Pomfrey herself had suggested that he put it on the market. Her suggestion had been greeted with a contemptuous snort.

"I see, it's very exclusive," the matron had chuckled.

Still, it was more than just the cream. It felt good to have someone, namely Harry, who was perfectly comfortable in his company, who teased him but did not disrespect him, and who laughed freely in the Potions Master's forbidding presence. He wondered how in Merlin's name the youth had managed to become so used to his unapproachable behaviour. Severus was fonder of Harry than he wanted to admit.

The taller wizard looked at Harry's face. It was a man's face; Severus could discern the slightest shadow of facial hair. Puberty had thankfully been reticent with acne for Harry, whose skin was smooth as that of a peach. The only really visible scar he bore was

the one Voldemort's curse had left behind, and that he kept hidden underneath his fringe. Harry had told Severus that the scar in itself did not disturb him at all; in fact, he quite liked its shape; but he hated the attention it drew to him. Harry was a picture of innocence and sensuality wrapped into one. The characteristic brooding look came into Severus's eyes. Most other people of Harry's age were enjoying their lives as much as they could; and with Voldemort around, time was more precious than ever. Yet Harry seemed happy in the dungeons with only Severus Snape and Nessa to keep him company.

"I want to show you something," Severus said. "Please dress warmly, we are going out into the grounds."

The snow crunched as two figures, one tall and the other smaller, left shoeprints in the white blanket. Severus led Harry to the grounds at the back of the castle, where people went less often. A musical sound, soothing, reminding him of one of the few happy aspects of his childhood, drifted over to Harry. He stopped and listened.

"Come," Severus said. Harry followed him to a gate leading into one of the many courtyards of Hogwarts Castle. There was a beech in the middle, but it was stripped of all its leaves. Wind chimes were attached to one of its branches. Harry approached and looked at the chimes. They tinkled softly at him. He moved closer. He had seen and heard wind chimes before. One of the Dursley's neighbours had a set of wind chimes, resulting in his aunt and uncle complaining about the "stupid racket" they made in windy weather. The neighbours finally started taking down the chimes every night after Uncle Vernon rumbled up to the owner like a military tank, and in the end they took them down altogether. Harry, however, had always found the chimes soothing, and the sound had been faint. He didn't know that wind chimes had been installed in this windy little courtyard. There was a bench in one corner. Severus sat down on it and watched as Harry approached the chimes and tilted his head, listening to them. A gust of wind made the chimes stir again. He likes

them, Severus mused. Harry sat down on the bench next to Severus, gloved hands folded in his lap.

"Did you put the chimes on the tree?"

"Yes," Severus replied. "The Headmaster and you have unlimited access to this place. It is off limits to the other students. They can hear the chimes, but a charm keeps them out. The spell, however, recognises the magical signatures of those who are permitted to enter."

Harry smiled at Severus.

"And you decided that it is not off limits for me?"

"Yes – after Christmas."

Harry smiled.

"Thank you for showing me this place, Severus." He told his husband about the chimes he had listened to when he was child until the neighbour had been forced to remove them.

"They have a soothing quality indeed," Severus said, and his tone and face were soft.

"Albus knows that I like this kind of atmosphere. He took me to this place many years ago and said that I could use it to be on my own. He himself likes to wander around in his favourite orchard in these grounds from time to time."

"So this is a kind of sanctum for you?"

"Yes. It is good to be away from the dungeons from time to time."

"For birds, too?" Harry asked, pointing at a birdhouse, also attached to the tree.

"Hm. Don't you dare tell anyone that their Potions Master has a weakness for chimes and birdhouses."

Harry laughed. Severus had never heard anyone laugh in the courtyard before, seeing that he was the only occupant. Even Dumbledore, though he could enter, never breached Severus's wish for privacy in this little place.

"The whole school would queue up over here if I told them," Harry remarked. He bent and picked up a fistful of snow. Severus's eyes narrowed and he braced himself for the snowball.

Chapter 25

CHAPTER 25

Harry raised his fist, the snowball firmly clutched in his palm. He made a throwing motion, but the ball did not leave his hand.

"Really. Can't you do better?" Severus drawled lazily. "I knew that you were only pretending to throw that snowball."

"Of course. You know everything," Harry grinned.

" *Accio* snowball!" Severus exclaimed. Harry's missile flew into Severus's hand, crumbling a little as the Potions Master caught it. Severus aimed: Harry ducked, his Quidditch and Duelling reflexes keen. The snowball flew harmlessly above his head and hit the wall. They had already indulged in an indoor snowball battle before and had not been able to agree on the winner. Harry was therefore determined to win this time, and he had more room since he was outside in the open air. A fierce snowball battle ensued. The wind chimes often tinkled due to the impact of a stray snowball. Finally, Harry stuck out a leg and made Severus stumble and trip over his foot. The tall wizard fell in the snow. Harry grinned widely.

"You…cheated!" Severus growled, eyes flashing ominously. Harry looked up at the sky and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans, whistling nonchalantly. This proved to be his undoing: Severus used a non-verbal spell to slam an invisible weight into Harry's knees, not enough to hurt him, but enough to knock him off his feet. Harry landed on his bottom with a squeak.

"Hey! At least I didn't use sneaky magic," he exclaimed indignantly, trying to pelt his smirking husband with clumps of snow. Severus dissolved them with casual flicks of his wand; then, rising on one knee, he imprisoned Harry's wrists in a gentle but firm grip.

"Gryffindor gallantry indeed!" he snorted.

"You cheated too! I saw you turn one snowball into three in mid-air…!"

"That's what one calls being creative," Severus said smugly.

"I disagree," Harry replied, boldly pushing Severus onto his back in the snow. Severus reached out, grabbed Harry's shoulders and pulled the youth down to him.

"And I disagree with the fact that you disagree with me," he murmured, his warm breath brushing Harry's cold face.

"And I disagree with the fact that you disagree that I disagree," Harry quipped.

"In that case…" Severus whispered, staring into Harry's eyes. He didn't complete his sentence but kept gazing fixedly at Harry.

"In that case?" Harry prompted, flushing under the intensity of the probing black eyes.

"In that case…you need to be punished," Severus said, scooping up snow and flinging it at Harry with a sudden movement.

"Oh! Just you wait!" Harry spluttered through a mouthful of snow. The two wizards rolled about in the white blanket, mock-wrestling. Finally, Severus came to rest on top of Harry.

"It is as I always suspected. You're a bottom, Mr Potter."

Harry looked confused; then he realized what Severus was alluding to. That Severus Snape, of all people, would actually broach a sexual topic!

"I wouldn't know," Harry said with disarming frankness, "I could imagine being, uh, versatile, though."

With an effort, he switched their positions.

"See?"

"I let you do that in order to boost your already overflowing ego," Severus remarked, managing to look utterly composed and unfazed even when lying on his back in the snow with mussed hair and wet clothes. They looked at each other for a few moments until Harry slid off his husband. They got up and dusted their clothes. A twitter and flurry of wings made them turn. A small brown bird was inspecting the birdhouse. Severus watched it keenly.

"Self-replenishing Charm," he explained to Harry. "For birdseed. It has to be renewed regularly, though."

He aimed his wand at the birdhouse and muttered a spell. The bird, startled by the sound of seeds rattling into the house, hopped away to a branch. Then, perceiving that there was no danger, it approached shyly and finally hopped into the house to eat.

"You like birds," Harry said with a smile.

"Songbirds like our visitor-" he gestured at the birdhouse, "waste their songs on this world, Harry."

"But without song, would there be any hope?"

"What is there to hope for, optimistic Gryffindor?" Severus asked with a slight sneer, staring into Harry's green eyes. "You, of all people, should be knowing about hopelessness."

"If you look at us, Severus, at you and me, at how we can talk and have snow combats…Then I would say that there's plenty to hope for," Harry answered, smiling.

We may not survive this battle, and even if we do, we will divorce. And yet he wants to know me, Severus thought, he doesn't give up hope even when it comes to me…

"Yes, I suppose there is hope in that," he agreed slowly. "Let's go back."

They returned to the dungeons; Harry occupied himself with reading the latest news on Quidditch and Severus went to unload a fat package containing several books for his library.

Harry was just putting down his magazine when Severus marched into the hall, the travelling cloak Harry had given him for Christmas draped around his figure.

"Voldemort?" Harry asked.

Severus nodded.

Harry went over to him and pressed his hand.

"Look after yourself," he said, moistening his lips with his tongue.

"Don't go running all the way to the headmaster if I am not back in an hour," Severus answered, touching Harry's arm lightly.

"Okay," Harry said somewhat tensely.

Much later, at night, Severus was sitting on his bed. He had come home and brushed past Harry wordlessly. He had a splitting headache. He winced as an image of torture flashed through his mind…

Harry, chained, bleeding, begging for mercy. Voldemort licking his lips in a sickening way.

"If you have done a good job, my dearest Severus, then I will not kill the boy. I will make him join my followers. The ultimate punishment for the years I spent struggling to come back." He uttered an icy laugh. "The great Harry Potter on my side. The world will be in my hands."

He laughed again.

"I am glad to see that he seems less defiant when you disport yourself with him, Severus."

"He is starting to realise the importance of fulfilling his marital duties in every aspect," Severus said expressionlessly.

Voldemort patted his shoulder patronisingly.

"Good work, my loyal Severus. I suggest that you return to your dainty Gryffindor toy and play with him some more. He still requires proper breaking-in."

Severus felt sick. He was finding it extremely difficult to send fake memories to Voldemort. He had started succumbing to Harry's kind nature quite some time ago and although he had always found it deeply disgusting to present Voldemort with an array of obscene images, it was harder than ever to do so. The bond between him and Harry was undeniable. He also detested the way Voldemort referred to Harry as "the boy" or "plaything" or "toy". Harry was in the blossom of manhood; and strangely enough, he seemed to be blossoming in the dungeons. Severus still felt guilty about their consummation. It had not been a sexual awakening for Harry. It had been suppression.

"Severus?" Harry's voice was worried, and there was a soft knock on his door.

"I am fine," Severus barked.

"You're not fine. I've been living with you for months. I should know by now."

Severus sighed heavily.

"Come in," he said coldly. The door opened, and Harry came inside, green eyes studying his face. He went over to Severus and sat next to him, placing his hand on Severus's left forearm with that innocence which made an ache spring up in Severus's chest.

"Are you aware what you are touching?" he growled.

Harry looked at him.

"I know. The Dark Mark."

They were silent for a little moment.

"Try and lie down for a short while, Severus," Harry suggested.

Instead of the acid comment he expected ("What a doting spouse you are, husband of mine!" or something similar), Severus sighed.

"I'll have a bath first."

He looked at Harry, and something stirred in his eyes.

"Have you eaten?"

Harry shook his head.

"I thought so. Just like the time when you went rushing to the Headmaster."

"I get worried about you," Harry said.

"I have been doing this for years, Harry," Severus said exasperatedly.

Harry reached behind his neck and unclasped his chain.

"Take this. It is for you to keep. I'd be happier if I knew that you're wearing it. Ron and Hermione gave it to me when I turned seventeen. It's not magical or anything, but it is symbolic of protection and friendship for me. And please don't tell me how Gryffindorish or sentimental that sounds."

Severus looked at him in surprise.

Harry put the chain on Severus. His heart leapt when he saw the expression in his husband's black eyes; it was warm and strangely sad: bittersweet.

Then, to Harry's complete astonishment, Severus stooped, kissed him briefly on the forehead and left the room. Harry blushed and touched the spot where he had been kissed. It seemed to tingle.

Chapter 26

CHAPTER 26

Severus moved swiftly through the corridors as he went in quest of Dumbledore's rooms. He raised his hand and touched the chain Harry had given him a few moments ago. He could feel Harry's forehead against his lips. It was the very first time he had kissed someone on the forehead. He had kissed men before in his brief sexual trysts, but those has been superficial emotionless kisses. No kiss could compare to the one he had bestowed on Harry. He reached the stone gargoyle which guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

"Eye candy," he said expressionlessly. The gargoyle leapt aside. Soon, Severus was seated opposite Dumbledore, sipping at a cup of tea which the Headmaster had insisted that he have. They discussed the information Severus had gleaned from his meeting with Voldemort. The disgust at the fake memories he had to give Voldemort was clear in Severus's voice. It did not escape Dumbledore, whose blue eyes found the chain shining softly around the Potions Master's neck.

"Harry gave it to me," Severus said, noticing Dumbledore's glance. Dumbledore smiled.

"Indeed?"

"He thinks that it will protect me on a symbolic level," Severus said without sarcasm. "He becomes nervous whenever I have to meet the Dark Lord."

"That much was obvious when he came here asking me about your whereabouts before Christmas," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling merrily. "You will have to hide it underneath your robes, though, otherwise Voldemort will become suspicious."

I never had anyone to wait for my return with eagerness or anxiety, Severus thought. Until now. Harry waits for me.

Dumbledore extracted a sherbet lemon and popped it daintily into his mouth.

"It certainly seems that married life suits you well, my dear boy."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"I believe you had a very agreeable birthday celebration."

Severus frowned for a moment. Then he realised that Harry must have told Nessa about the celebration, and that Nessa had probably informed half the pictures in the castle on her nocturnal wanderings.

"Yes, Ha - he took more trouble than was worth for the occasion," Severus said dryly. The twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes increased when Severus hastily switched the first two letters of Harry's name into a pronoun.

"How about a round of chess?" Dumbledore changed the topic.

"Certainly, Albus," Severus said.

After Severus had left, Dumbledore hummed happily and walked about his office on light steps.

"Why on earth would Potter bother gifting Snape with a chain?" Phineas Black drawled from his portrait.

"Because sometimes, Phineas, there is more magic in a simple gesture than in wand-waving and spells," Dumbledore explained.

Phineas made a bored face.

"I think I will visit my other portrait," he yawned.

While Severus was in Dumbledore's office, Harry sketched a picture. When he had finished, he put down his pencil and leant back. A brilliant smile illuminated his face. Severus Snape, the cynical Potions Master who hated him so fiercely, had kissed him on the forehead. Harry brushed the spot with his knuckles. He shook his head slowly. Never, never, never would he have believed it possible for Severus and him to find a way to each other. When had it started to change? After he had rushed to Dumbledore's office when he could no longer suppress his anxiety about Severus not coming back from the Death Eaters' dinner? He was still smiling when the door opened and Severus whisked inside their rooms.

"What are you smiling about?" he wanted to know, seeing Harry's expression.

"I'm happy because you and I no longer hate each other after all these years. That we are friends."

Severus studied for a few moments.

"I suppose you could say that persistence pays off," he said. He nodded at the sketch in Harry's hand.

"What have you drawn?" he asked. Harry handed him the sketch.

There was a low shadowy brick wall in the foreground. Up in the sky, the silhouette of a dragon flying across a full moon could be seen. Two wands were sitting on top of the wall, and one was lying over the other in what could be interpreted as a protective manner. Severus looked more closely at the wands and as he did so, a faint colour tinged Harry's cheeks. Severus's wand was as black as his eyes and hair, and it was long and slender, like his fingers and height. Harry's holly wand was paler and a little shorter; it was their wands which were resting peacefully upon the wall, and Harry's wand was underneath Severus's.

Severus looked into the green eyes. Harry grinned a little.

"Didn't you say that you think I'm a bottom?" he said cheekily.

"I recall that you prefer to think of yourself in terms of…versatile?" Severus said, his eyes glinting with amusement. He handed the sketch back to Harry.

"Well, only in theory," Harry replied.

There was a small silence during which they looked at each other. Severus was used to assessing people and guessing at their moods even without applying Legilimency. Now he sensed a sudden pang of sorrow coming from Harry, and the green eyes seemed to darken.

"What are you thinking of?" Severus wanted to know.

"Well, how much time have I got for the practical aspect when a murderous wizard is on my heels and trying to find a gap in Hogwarts's armour? Even if we succeed in defeating Voldemort, who will say that we will survive? I don't want anything to happen to you!"

It all came out in a rush.

"Have you no faith in yourself, Harry? You are being trained by very skilled witches and wizards. You have friends. You have potential. And you have my blood protection."

"If we are linked together by blood, Severus, then…so are our lives. I can't help worrying whenever you go to Voldemort. Severus, I know how skilled you are, but it doesn't prevent me from…from being afraid for you."

"Afraid? You? A Gryffindor?" Severus said, raising his eyebrow, trying to lighten Harry's mood.

"I wish there was a way for you to promise me that nothing will ever happen to you," Harry said, not heeding him. He reached up and touched the chain he had given him. Severus observed that the youth was fighting against his tears to judge from the way he was

pressing his lips together. The sketch slid out of his hands and onto the floor.

Severus had never comforted anyone before. No one in their right mind would have chosen him as their confidant of their worries. Also, no one had ever told him that he or she was afraid of something happening to him. Dumbledore was genuinely concerned about Severus, often expressing this by touching his shoulder or telling him to take care of himself. Severus regarded Dumbledore as the guide he had never had in life. Harry was the first person to explicitly voice his fears.

Severus did not know what to do as he stared at Harry. He only knew that words failed in this situation, and he, for all his prodigious skill in articulation and language, was helpless. He put one arm around Harry and held him close to him. Harry pressed his face against the hollow of his neck.

"Sorry," he said in a muffled voice.

Severus made a soothing sound and gently ran his hand over Harry's back. What is he doing to me? I am holding him and consoling him. I, Severus Snape, the last person people would turn to when they are sad, he reflected. The last time I saw him cry was when we were arguing, when we hated each other…

They stood like that for a little while, Harry crying silently, his tears wetting Severus's hair and collar.

When was the last time I cried? Severus wondered. His chest seemed to contract, and he suddenly realised that it had been years and years since he had shed a tear. He had even wondered from time to time whether the bitterness had dried up his ability to shed tears. He drew back and looked at Harry's face.

"Sorry," Harry repeated, trying to smile.

"Don't say sorry," Severus said gruffly.

"Thank you, Severus."

"Come. Sit in the library with me. A round of Wizarding Scrabble will definitely work wonders," the Potions Master said, and Harry followed him into the enormous room.

Soon, the youth was smiling and laughing as he tried to arrange his chips together in coherent words. Severus's sarcastic witticisms added to the lightening of the atmosphere. They left the room to have dinner together. After their meal, it was very late, and they were both sleepy.

Before they retired to their respective bedrooms, Harry looked at Severus intensely for a few moments before giving him a brief hug and thanking him for being there for him. He left Severus standing wordlessly in the middle of the hall. Something on the floor caught his eye; it was the sketch Harry had dropped on the floor. He picked it up and went back to his bedroom. He gazed at it for a long time, his eyes not moving from the two wands.

Chapter 27

CHAPTER 27

The next evening, Harry came back massaging his ribs after a particularly difficult Duelling session with Shacklebolt, who was pleased with his progress. However, Harry had not been fast enough to avoid a hex and had been slammed against a wall, resulting in a painful bruise on his side.

"More practise," Severus commented impassively, watching the young man, "and rubbing at your ribs like that will not help. Sit down on the sofa and remove all those layers you are wearing – you remind me of an onion. I will be right back."

He returned to find a topless Harry sitting innocently among the cushions, completely oblivious to how sensual he looked. Severus suppressed a most appreciative glance.

"Lie down and I will apply this."

Harry obeyed and closed his eyes, enjoying the skill of his husband's agile fingers.

"Snape Deluxe," he remarked at one point.

Severus glared at him and muttered "Ridiculous!" underneath his breath. He continued massaging Harry gently.

"Severus, that feels so good! How about a range of potions for therapeutic uses?"

Severus snorted, trying to ignore Harry's teasing. He continued with his ministrations for another five minutes. Harry was completely relaxed, one hand resting upon his abdomen, just above his navel.

"You can sit up," Severus announced finally.

Harry sat up and touched his side. The bruise had already faded considerably thanks to the magical properties of the ointment.

"Super," he commented.

Severus's mouth quirked a little and he handed him his t-shirt and Weasley jumper.

"Any news from your friends?" he asked after Harry had dressed again. Harry was taken aback for a moment. Severus had never inquired about his friends or about what they were doing, although he was aware of Harry's lively and faithful correspondence with them. Harry proceeded to give Severus news about his friends. He watched Severus discreetly for signs of boredom but could not see any.

"What about your friends?" Harry asked.

Severus's eyes darkened.

"Are you mocking me?" he asked coldly. Harry looked at him, puzzled.

Severus uttered a short laugh.

"I have no friends. Is that such an astonishment?"

"But I am your friend. And so is Dumbledore," Harry said calmly.

"You have your own friends. Am I truly the kind of friend you desire?"

"We've been friends for quite a few weeks so far," Harry replied, raising his legs and perching his feet on the edge of the sofa, "and I can't imagine you as another person, Severus. It's the quality, not the quantity, after all."

Severus's eyes lingered on Harry's jeans-clad thighs for a moment before moving on to his face.

"True," he agreed, his tapering fingers playing with the jar of ointment. Harry watched Severus's agile hands. Severus noticed his gaze.

"You have such quick hands," Harry remarked as Severus raised his eyebrows questioningly.

He took Severus's hand – the Potions Master did not protest – and pressed their palms together. Harry's hand was as delicately built as Severus's though not as thin and slender; it was also smaller than Severus's palm.

"You have longer fingers," Harry stated. Severus's finger curled over his.

"You are smaller than me in general." He rose, retaining Harry's hand in his, making Harry follow his movement. Severus bent his head a little to be on the same eye-level as Harry.

"If your relatives had fed you properly, then it is possible that you may have been a little taller."

"Who knows," Harry said, once again startled because Severus had referred to his relatives and was acknowledging what he had seen in Harry's mind during their Occlumency lessons: that Harry had not been spoilt and pampered at all – rather the opposite.

"Your parents," Harry said softly and carefully, knowing that he broaching a very delicate topic, "did they-"

"Feed me?" Severus finished his question. He pressed Harry's hand slightly. "My mother did, but without…" he shrugged slightly, "emotion."

His voice dripped with disdain as he uttered the last word.

"Were you ever locked up?" Harry asked even more softly. Severus knew that Harry was thinking of his cupboard.

"No. They didn't care. I just happened to exist. Did your aunt and uncle shout at each other and row all the time?"

Harry shook his head.

"That they didn't."

There was a small pause during which they gazed at each other, the tall wizard and the smaller one.

"Are your parents still alive?" Harry asked finally.

"No. They died. My father drank himself to death and my mother committed suicide. They were dead by the time I was nineteen."

Harry didn't know what to say. Severus merely looked at him. At last, the words came back to Harry.

"Hogwarts is home and family for us both, then. And you, too, are my family, Severus."

Severus said dryly:

"You have to be a Gryffindor to regard me as a family member."

The grandfather clock in the corner chimed.

"Go ahead and eat," Severus told him. "I have a detention to supervise."

"Did the student do anything worse than I used to do in your classes?" Harry asked, humour sparking in his eyes.

"He gave vent to an excessive amount of flatulence."

Hary stared.

"You mean he…er…?"

"Yes. Resonantly. In *my* class. It naturally distracted many people and led to ruined potions."

Harry covered his mouth and began to giggle helplessly.

"That is the first time I have heard of such a thing," he gasped, leaning against the table and clutching at his sides. Severus glared at him and marched out of the room.

When he came back later, he was greeted by the sight of Harry comfortably lying on the carpet near the hearth, swinging his feet up and down while he read a letter from Hermione, to judge from the handwriting. Severus looked at the youth. Handsome, brave, smart and sweet-natured. He could be rather stubborn and impulsive sometimes. Just as stubborn as Severus himself, in fact.

Harry smiled at him. Severus gave him a nod and went over to his favourite sofa, opening a book; but his dark eyes were trained on Harry, lingering on the curve of his feet, calves and legs, travelling over his firm posterior and back, and finally coming to rest upon his face, where Severus studied Harry's slightly parted mouth, his nose and the glimmer of green from behind his spectacles. His jetty hair was as messy as ever. Harry got up, stretching lightly. Severus's probing gaze followed his movements. Harry removed his glasses, raised one arm to his face and rubbed one side of his face against the inner crook of his elbow.

"Dobby has kept dinner for you," Harry said.

Severus went over to the table while Harry disappeared inside the library.

When he went to bed, Severus discovered that he could not sleep. His mind's eye lingered on Harry lying on the carpet. Harry sitting on the sofa with his upper body bare. The suppleness of his skin when Severus massaged it. Harry's hand resting peacefully near his navel. Harry's hand in his…A spark of desire stirred within him. His brief premarital thrills with men he didn't know had been superficial and

desperate. Too quick, too transient. When had he last felt true and profound desire? Who in their right mind thought of the surly Potions Master as a sexual being? Severus's hand glided down to his stomach and further down. He touched himself, and his nerves reacted with pleasurable vibrations. He was aching. Severus began to discover himself anew, drinking in the way his body reacted to his own touches, to its growing sensitivity. He forcefully shoved aside the fake memories he had to show Voldemort. They would turn his desire to choking ashes if he did not banish them out of his mind for now. Instead, he imagined consummating his bond with Harry all over again. Except that Harry was facing him, and his legs were wrapped around Severus's waist. His head was thrown back, the unruly hair sweaty. What did Harry smell like when he was sweaty? What did he look like when he was aroused? What did his mouth taste like? He wondered whether Harry had ever thoroughly explored and touched himself the way he was exploring and touching himself now, fingers sliding under the waistband of his pyjama trousers, his other hand unbuttoning his top, caressing the heated skin beneath it. The dark and the confines of his bedroom were the silent witnesses of his moment of ecstasy, of his suppressed moans and the sound of hands clutching at bedclothes.

Severus lay in bed, exhausted and sticky, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

"I am insane," he muttered to himself. "What am I thinking?"

Harry was half his age. He was a youth. If they survived, they would divorce. His thoughts turned to Voldemort.

"Play with your toy, my dear Severus. Breaking it in well does take its time, especially if it is as recalcitrant as you tell me."

A wave of sickness engulfed Severus. He felt like a pervert. How could he possibly think of Harry in terms of desire? Severus flung back the bedclothes and rushed to the bathroom. He filled the tub with hot water and soap. He lay in the tub for a long time, as if

hoping to wash away the memories of Voldemort and his yearning for Harry's freshness and innocence.

Chapter 28

CHAPTER 28

While Severus lay in the bathtub, slowly managing to relax, Harry sat on his bed, toes scuffing the sheets as he mulled over the person whose name was Severus Snape and to whom he was married. He found it nearly incredible that he not only no longer disliked the man but was starting to find him attractive. He had discovered that Severus could have a rather sensual way of looking at him; the gaze of his eyes was like a caress; and since Severus had shown him the little courtyard with the wind chimes and had told him a little about his childhood, Harry had felt the bond between them grow warmer or stronger. Harry got up and fetched his sketchbook. He remembered how he had once tried to sketch Severus's face from memory. He closed his eyes and decided to draw Severus's figure; he felt he could capture Severus's whole outline better than details of his person in the case of Severus's physical absence.

His hand moved quickly. Instead of looking satisfied when he had finished, his face became gloomy. His thoughts drifted. Severus in his usual black class robes, Severus with his long black hair. Severus wearing pants and shirt on weekends or in the evening. Severus's exquisitely shaped hands holding a small ladle – something he used all the time whenever he brewed his potions. Severus, Severus, Severus…Harry could not stop repeating the name in his head, stressing the first "e", then the second "e", and finally the "u"; or drawing out the first and last "s", or lingering on the "v". His mind returned to Severus's hands. Harry raised his pyjama shirt and touched his ribs, where he had been bruised. Maybe it had been Severus's hands which had worked the magic, and not so much the ointment. Or both. Severus had made the ointment himself, to judge from the handwritten label stuck to the jar. He had been relaxed, lying on the sofa while Severus massaged him. But hadn't he felt the slightest tingle of excitement at that strangely intimate touch, at the fact that he was lying topless among the

cushions with Severus bending over him, his hair tickling Harry's collarbone or stomach from time to time? He could see Severus pushing back his hair in that sharp, nearly irritable manner. He wondered if their growing closeness was partially due to the blood bond. It was a magical contract. The information on blood bonding had focused more on the technical aspect of the ceremony. Or had he and Severus simply become so used to living together that they were learning to appreciate each other with affection? Harry thought that their friendship was a warm and vivacious thing; he had seen Severus smile – something he was sure hardly anyone had ever witnessed before. And he had been in Severus's arms. Severus had kissed his forehead. He had comforted him and looked at his tear-stained face with such gentleness…

Severus's smile. Severus's eyes, no longer dead and cold. Severus's bravery in the face of Voldemort's perverseness and cruelty. Severus's fingers curling over his hand. A gesture which called forth so many tingles and which made the hair on his arms stand up that Harry felt restless and slid off his bed. He stared at his sketch for a moment.

"I don't even have a photograph of you," he said loudly into the silence of his room. He had been thinking of buying a camera to take snaps of scenes and objects which he could fit and combine into his drawings.

The next day, Severus was somewhat taken aback when Harry hurtled into their rooms, breathless and a camera clutched in his hand. He had borrowed it off Colin Creevey, who, although no longer clingy and such a fanatic of Harry, had been delighted to lend it to him.

"What is that for?" Severus asked somewhat peremptorily.

"To take a picture of you."

"You have already sketched me."

"It's not the same thing," Harry remarked, raising the camera to his face and peering at Severus through the lens.

"Magical drawings can also move. Will you kindly put that thing down?"

"It's still not the same thing. I'd like a snap of the two of us together. What do you think?" Harry asked him lightly.

"What for?"

"That way I have a picture of the two us, and I can carry it around, and so can you, if you want," Harry replied, lowering the camera and flipping it around, pressing a couple of buttons.

"Okay, I've activated the timer. If I put it on the table over there, then that will leave us ten seconds to pose."

"I don't-"

"I know you don't want to."

"You don't know what I was about to say," Severus said, annoyed.

"I'm sure you were about to say that you don't want to pose," Harry quipped. Severus rolled his eyes.

"Very well. Go ahead. Let us get done with this waste of time."

Harry frowned slightly.

Severus clarified:

"We see each other every day. What do you need a photograph for?"

"To make me feel secure. To look at when you're with Voldemort," Harry said.

"I think you are taking your marital duties too seriously."

"Severus, you are being very snappy," Harry said calmly.

Severus was silent. It was true that he had been particularly short-tempered. He knew only too well that his encounter with desire for Harry and his delicious rediscovery of his body were to blame.

Black eyes and green eyes studied each other. Then Severus took the camera from him.

"So it's on timer?"

Harry nodded.

Severus pressed the button to activate the timer. He set the camera on top of a shelf and hurried back with Harry. He wrapped his arm around the young man's slight waist.

"Is this pose to your taste, maudlin Gryffindor?"

Harry blushed.

"I'm not maudlin!"

"Of course you're not," Severus said sarcastically, patting a strand of unruly hair out of Harry's face.

"Hey!" Harry exclaimed.

The camera flashed, capturing their image – Severus with his hand brushing aside a strand of Harry's hair, and Harry looking half indignant, half amused.

"Now one of you alone," Harry said, grabbing the camera. Severus, looking deliberately bored, masked his face with his usual Potions Master mien.

"Think of something funny," Harry said. "Think of the itch bomb prank you pulled off on me."

It worked: a glint of amusement appeared in the black eyes and the corners of the stern mouth rose. Harry instantly pressed the button.

"And now, one of you," Severus said softly. Their fingers touched and their eyes met as they exchanged the camera.

"Smile for me, Harry," Severus told him. Had Harry's smile been one the sources which had triggered that overwhelming desire in him last night?

Harry did more than smile. He laughed, his eyes sparkling, and waved at the camera.

They developed the pictures together in Severus's potions laboratory, using the magical potion which would animate them.

Harry grinned when he looked at the picture of Severus brushing his hair out of his eyes.

"That's really cute, you know," he commented.

"Whatever you say," Severus said sardonically.

"Okay. This one is for both of us. And these look really good." He studied the pictures of them posing separately.

Severus silently took the one of Harry, and Harry picked up the picture of his husband.

Their gazes collided again.

"Uhm, I've got to go for my lessons with Professors Moody and McGonagall. Thank you for posing, Severus," Harry said, standing up and leaving the room. Severus gazed at the animated picture of the two of them together. There were two copies of the snapshot, and he picked up one, wondering whether he should have it framed. On the other hand, what was the use? Why should he display a picture showing the two of them together if they were to be separated when they confronted Voldemort or if they divorced?

Severus recalled how he had shown the divorce forms to Harry after their marriage. How he had made it clear that it was something he was looking forward to. He tried to imagine the divorce. And life afterwards. Provided they were still alive at all. What would it be like? Two former spouses who were forming an emotional bond after years of hate? How would they behave towards each other? Severus sighed and examined the photograph of Harry. Laughing, waving and shining like the sun. That smile! Severus felt something clench in his breast and ground his teeth.

"Stop it!" he said sternly to himself. An image of Harry lying on the sofa flitted through his mind.

After his lessons, Harry talked a little with Nessa.

"Your husband is happier, Harry Potter," she said. "You share more than a blood bond now. You are more than just used to each other."

Harry smiled.

"Yes. We are friends."

"Go inside, young one, and warm the place with your smile," Nessa said.

Harry found Severus sitting on the sofa, casually holding a glass of wine in his hand, a large book on his lap. A narrow-shaped bottle stood before him on the table.

"Elf-made wine," he said as Harry looked at it questioningly. "A brand-new bottle."

"I've never had that before," Harry said, "is it as sour as most wines are?"

Severus raised an eyebrow and his thin mouth curved into an amused smile. He closed the book and set it aside. Harry could see

that he was wearing the chain he had given him. He never seemed to take it off.

"Sour? I am relieved that your alcohol intake seems to have been very minimal, to judge from your opinion of wines."

"Well, I don't suppose Butterbeer is something to worry about in terms of alcohol content," Harry remarked, sitting down next to Severus, "though I must say that the wine you're drinking has a beautiful colour."

"If you like the colour, then maybe its taste will appeal to you."

"So it isn't sour?"

Severus leant towards Harry.

"Rather the opposite," he breathed.

"May I taste it?"

"A drop won't harm," Severus remarked, languidly dipping a slender forefinger into the deep ruby depths. He brushed the crimson drop against Harry's lower lip. Harry nearly forgot to breathe when he felt Snape's finger touch his mouth. The finger was withdrawn, and Harry curiously licked his bottom lip while Severus watched him closely.

"It's too little, I can't get a real taste of it," Harry complained, "I only caught the slightest flavour, and it wasn't enough."

"Shall I humour you with a sip?" Severus murmured, picking up his glass. Even a few weeks ago, Harry would have been surprised that Severus was willing to share the same glass with him.

"Come closer," Severus said, his voice low and silky.

Harry shifted closer, and Severus held the glass to his lips, tilting it very slowly. Harry waited impatiently for the liquid to pour into his

mouth. Droplets of something deliciously sweet touched his tongue. The glass was removed.

"That still wasn't enough!" Harry protested.

"You will have to come even closer if you want more," Severus whispered, his slim hand keeping the glass out of Harry's reach.

"How much closer?" Harry asked, his green eyes alert, aware of the mounting tension and of the fact that Severus seemed to be flirting unabashedly with him.

"Where is that renowned Gryffindor courage?" Severus inquired lazily. Harry rose and boldly straddled his husband's lap.

Severus shifted the wine glass to the space between their bodies, his free hand on Harry's left thigh.

"Is that close enough?" Harry asked, placing his hands on Severus's shoulders. His jeans were starting to constrict him, and the hand on his leg wasn't helping matters.

The glass was approached to his lips a second time. This time, the wine flooded his mouth in a warm enticing wave. It was honey-sweet, flavoured with skilfully mixed spices. Severus made to take away the glass again, but Harry was quicker, imprisoning the glass in his hand. Severus's black eyes glinted, and he released the stem.

"Mmmh, delicious," Harry commented, holding the half-empty glass to Severus's mouth. Severus sipped elegantly, took the glass from Harry and leant forwards to place it on the table, causing wonderful friction in Harry's groin as he moved. He leant back, locking eyes with Harry.

"Delicious is definitely a good assessment," he agreed, hands on both of Harry's thighs now, drawing casual circles with his palms. "Delicious," he repeated, whispering into Harry's ear before capturing his green eyes with his black ones again.

Their faces were very close. Suddenly, Severus's face went blank the way it always did when he suppressed the pain radiating from his Dark Mark.

"I have to go," he said abruptly. Harry immediately slid off his lap, and Severus rose and disappeared inside the bathroom to dress. He soon returned and picked up his travelling cloak. "I'll be back," he said.

Harry nodded.

"Look after yourself."

Severus left.

Harry went to his bedroom and collapsed onto the floor, his back pressed against the wall.

The wine was still sweet on his tongue and his arousal was heavy and trapped. He slid his hand between his thighs and bit back a loud moan. He had been so close to brushing Severus Snape's lips with his own…The notion of kissing Severus sent him over the brink, making him search wildly for satisfaction until he was lying on the floor, one hand in his jeans, his body shuddering with pleasure, a scream caught in his throat, forbidden to escape; and the feeling was as heady as when he had sat on Severus's lap, tasting that delicious wine, and moreover, tasting the spice of Severus's scorching sexuality, which paled the flavour of the elf-made wine.

Chapter 29

CHAPTER 29

A/N:

Darker than Larry: I do hope that your tinglings will subside when you read this chapter. I must, however, decline your, shall I say, procreative offer.

love-orthelack-thereof: I am deeply flattered by your compliment :-)

Thank you for submitting so many reviews and comments for this story! And for visiting my blog and voting in the poll :-)

Harry remained on the floor, his jeans pushed down to his thighs; his body was still sensitive from the aftermath of such overwhelming and exquisite pleasure. Harry had explored his body several times, but he had never had anyone specific in mind. Least of all Severus Snape. In fact, if he had wanted to keep erotic thoughts at bay, then thinking of Severus Snape would definitely have been the ideal method. Now, the opposite was the case, and Harry passed his arm tiredly over his eyes. He sat up and reached for his spectacles with his clean hand. He washed himself in the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror for a few moments, searching for answers in the eyes of his own reflection but finding none. His reflection seemed to disappear, and in its stead he could see the deep black eyes of his husband and Protector.

"Severus," he sighed and went to the hall and sat down on the sofa. The bottle of elf-made wine was still on the table, along with the glass from which they had both drunk. Tingles rushed down his spine, and he was straddling Severus's lap again, their faces so close to touching, eyes locked, Severus's hands drawing random circles on his thighs. Harry tried to shake off the beginnings of

another arousal by interrupting the memory and fairly bounded from the sofa, pacing about to distract himself while he waited for Severus to return. And when Severus returned…what would they do? Speak about what had happened? But nothing had really happened. They had not kissed. They had just been…teasing each other. Flirting came closer to the truth, though…

A short while later, the door opened; Severus was back from the meeting; he looked pale and tired; he discovered his husband waiting for him eagerly on the sofa. It was evident from the way the young man started up when Severus opened the door, from the sudden sparkle in his eyes.

He is happy when I come back, Severus thought with a strange pang.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked him at once.

"Do you see me on a stretcher?" was the dour reply. Harry looked serious. In fact, he looked distressed.

"Don't say things like that," he said forcefully.

Severus placed his hand on Harry's slight shoulder and pressed it.

"Worrywart," he said, but his tone was fond.

"What happened? What did Voldemort want?"

"He called in a general Death Eater's meeting. He is crafting plans for the possible dominion over muggles and magical people. He is also thinking of how to…train you once I bring you to him in a brainwashed state which will allow him to control you as if you were an automaton."

Severus paused and a fierce spark came into his eyes.

"I shall never allow it, naturally, and nor will you. You have always been a fighter," he added.

Harry nodded grimly.

"Yes. Both of us," he affirmed.

Severus removed his cloak and carefully put it away. He opened the collar of his robes and took out Harry's chain which he had kept hidden from view.

"I am going to change," he said and went to his bedroom. Harry went to Severus's library. It was one of his husband's favourite resorts, especially after meetings with Voldemort. Sure enough, Severus soon joined him and approached a cupboard near which Harry was sitting.

He opened a drawer, and both he and Harry recognised the divorce papers which it contained. Severus deliberately avoided Harry's eye and stuffed them without comment into the furthest corner. One of the pages got jammed between the draw and its compartment. Severus wrenched it out with unnecessary violence, shoved the paper inside brutally and slammed the drawer.

"If we get through the war, then we'll still be friends afterwards," Harry said softly but steadily. "You'll still let me go near the wind chimes, will you?"

Severus gazed at him quickly and then stared back at the drawer.

"Yes. Always, Harry."

He sat down next to the young wizard, and Harry leant against him, probably as a gesture to comfort him. Harry was becoming good at figuring out Severus's moods. Severus did not push him away, although a part of his mind was screaming at him that if he did not increase the distance between the two of them, then it would be too late, and Severus would be attached to Harry too deeply, too sweetly…Severus noticed that Harry's breathing was slow and regular. He looked at him and saw that he had fallen asleep. Severus carefully moved his sitting position in order to examine Harry's face.

The sleep of a child, Severus thought. He looks like a mere boy when he sleeps. He is a man-boy. Merlin, why have you placed such a burden on him, of all people? Why didn't you place it all upon my shoulders?

"My joys will be yours, as your joys will be mine. My sorrows will be yours, as your sorrows will be mine. I am your Protector, and my blood will merge with yours," Severus whispered the bonding words half to himself, half to Harry; and it seemed that he finally understood the emotional depth of their meaning.

Severus tried to be cool and distanced towards Harry during the next weeks, determined not to let the youth come too close to him and his feelings. He stopped asking for Harry's help to chop up potions ingredients, and when Harry suggested that they go for a walk or play a game, he evasively answered that he had a lot of work. He also made sure not to display any interest when he saw Harry sketching or reading. Harry sometimes brought his friends, including Ginny and Luna, to Severus's rooms. Severus would usually stay in his laboratory or in the library and leave them to their own devices. Afterwards, he would ask Harry what they had done and talked about. Now, he did not bother to ask Harry his usual questions when Harry, Luna and Ginny spent an evening in Harry's room. Harry noticed Severus's detached behaviour and was upset. He tried to distract himself and tell himself that Severus was simply very busy and had less time for him, but his intuition said otherwise.

After three weeks, Severus noticed that Harry smiled less and was quieter. Can it be that he is subdued because of *me* ? the Potions Master wondered. He decided to try out an experiment.

"I have been carelessly and shamefully neglecting our interactive sessions during the last couple of weeks," Severus said rather loftily on a mild March evening. "Will you deign to accompany me to Hogsmeade? I have an appallingly long shopping list and I am sure you have things to buy as well."

The smile which brightened the whole room returned to Harry's face, and his eyes sparkled as he looked at Severus.

How can it be that he feels so genuinely towards me? That he considers me such a close friend after years of hatred? Severus wondered incredulously.

"Yeah, sure! When?"

"Tomorrow evening?"

Harry nodded and smiled at him again. .

"You have got something on your cheek," Severus lied smoothly.

He boldly touched Harry's cheek with his knuckles and watched a soft blush flood his young husband's face.

Is he really that shy? He has beaten Voldemort and a dragon, and he blushes when I touch his face. He is too sweet for his own good, Severus mused.

They went to Hogsmeade the next evening, Severus making sure that Harry was at his side – Voldemort and his Death Eaters were ever-present at the back of his mind and he was fiercely determined to keep his husband out of harm's way. Severus felt elated with Harry walking next to him and pointing out interesting motives for sketching. It seemed to be in no time at all that Severus had bought everything on his list. Harry's list was small, and Severus frowned.

"Restocking your wardrobe would not hurt," he remarked.

"But I've got more than enough clothes, and they're in good condition, I bought some stuff during the holidays and-" he was interrupted by Severus giving him a stern look.

"We are going to a good clothes store, and there you will choose whatever you like, provided it is not garish or somehow offensive to the eye."

"In that case, all my things will have to be black," Harry joked.

"I like green on you."

"That's because it's your House colour."

"It suits your eyes," Severus remarked.

"And black suits yours," Harry remarked. "But I'm going to pay."

"You shall do nothing of the sort."

"But I want to pay."

"And I don't want you to pay."

"Why not?" Harry asked seriously.

"Because *I* am inviting you to this little spree of ours," Severus answered curtly.

"Thank-"

"Don't say it," Severus said. "Here we are."

"Okay, but you've got to buy something for yourself if I'm to go in there."

"What exactly do you imagine under 'something'?" Severus wanted to know.

"I like you better in shirts than in robes. Shirts don't hide your figure so much," Harry said frankly.

"Mh. I see," Severus said pensively.

He steered Harry into a large shop. A young wizard approached and asked how he could help them. Recognition flashed across his face as he looked at the tall dark wizard and the youth, but he maintained

his professional attitude, though this may have been due to the narrowing of Severus's eyes – a sign of warning. Harry opened his mouth to answer, but Severus was quicker.

"My husband is searching for clothes which truly suit him and bring out his charms," he said sleekly.

Harry went red as a tomato. The assistant cleared his throat.

"We have a lot of nice things which would look very good on you, sir," he addressed Harry, summoning a tape measure with a wave of his wand. Harry was soon given a pile of clothes to try on and ushered into a changing room while the assistant served another customer. Severus waited near the changing room. If anyone tried to open the door from outside, then the door gave the intruder a painful kick, causing the victim to fall right in the middle of the shop. Severus respected Harry's privacy anyway and was patient while his husband tried on the clothes. Harry emerged, parading before Severus in tight trousers.

Severus looked at him critically.

"Please turn around," he said. Harry obeyed, unintentionally offering his husband a good view of his firm posterior.

Severus made a sound of appreciation. He himself was unsure whether this was because of the trousers or due to Harry's figure.

"Turn around again."

Harry did so, and Severus smoothed the collar of his shirt, his palm brushing Harry's collarbone. Harry raised his hand and ran it through his hair. Severus's attention was attracted to his wrist. He had noticed that Harry's watch was an ancient shabby thing.

That shoddy watch! Severus stared at it.

"How old is that watch?" he asked abruptly.

"About ten years old. A hand-me-down of Dudley's when he broke it," Harry said, "my aunt had it repaired and gave it to me so that I would be punctual with the household chores, as she put it. It stopped working after I had to swim in the lake during the Triwizard Tournament and I had it repaired in Hogsmeade. I've never thought of getting a new watch. It works and that's all I need it for. To read the time."

"May I look at it?" Severus asked. Harry removed it and handed it to Severus, who stared at the worn leather strap and scratched glass with distaste. He handed it back after a few moments of scrutiny.

Finally, Harry's clothes were ready, and it was Severus's turn to try on shirts while Harry picked out some for him.

When Severus paid at the counter, Harry hugged him in front of everyone.

"Thank you," he whispered, "my family never bought me anything."

Embarrassed but pleased, Severus held the youth against him for a few moments.

"At least you won't walk around looking like an onion with all those layers of clothes you wear," he murmured into Harry's ear.

Harry laughed and drew back. If any hostile eyes have witnessed the hug, then they'll think I'm doing a fabulous job of brainwashing Harry, Severus thought wryly.

That night, Harry touched himself slowly, thoroughly, wonderingly, revelling in the sensuality of his body, in its ability to feel so much and transmit its sensations in such waves of pleasure. Harry closed his eyes, arching his body. He had never done this before, lying completely naked in bed and caressing himself everywhere. Instead, he had preferred furtive experiments under the cover of his clothes and within the shelter of the bed hangings. Was it only now that he was discovering how delicate his stomach was, or that simply

prodding his inner thigh was enough to make him shiver all over? He imagined Severus's hair tips and long fingers brushing his skin. A few minutes later, he was panting in bed , drained; and Severus was taking another bath for what must have been the umpteenth time in a series of nights, one arm draped behind his head as he tried to relax in the hot water, torn between guilt and yearning where his husband was concerned.

Chapter 30

CHAPTER 30

Longings and daydreams of embraces and kisses began to stir Harry. However, he yearned for far more than just superficial sexual gratification. He wanted to look into Severus's eyes, hear his voice in his ear, feel his goodwill and affection reflected in an embrace...

"What are these feelings I am developing for my husband, who just happens to be Severus Snape?" he would whisper from time to time to himself.

The very last thing he had expected from this marriage was developing feelings for Severus, former Death Eater, detested Potions Master and nemesis of James Potter and Sirius Black, the people Harry held close to his heart. If Harry could not forget Severus's decidedly unpleasant history, then he could not forget what he had learnt about the man during the months he had lived together with him; and what he had learnt had touched him in a completely unforeseen manner.

In his confusion, he turned to his sketching and drawing for relief. Some of the motives he drew were taken from his surroundings and others stemmed from his imagination. Thus, he sketched flowers blurred by rain when he was out in the grounds, and the wind chimes and birdhouse in Severus's little sanctuary found their way onto drawing paper as well; and from his imagination, he drew two rings which were lying on a table, touching. One ring was set with a green gem and the other with a black one. His favourite and most personal sketch was that of a shadowy messy-haired figure with a cavity in its chest, kneeling next to a bleeding heart while another tall slim profile had its back turned to both. Although this confusion made him feel both uncomfortable and secretly exhilarated around Severus at the same time, he was happy to see that Severus did not revert to his distanced pre-Hogsmeade-shopping-trip behaviour. On the contrary;

when he saw Harry wearing the new things he had bought him, he smiled rather proudly; and towards the middle of March, he handed a small packet to Harry.

"For you," he said.

"For me? But what is the occasion?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Opening it would be a very recommendable start," Severus hinted loftily.

Harry looked at the packet and turned it over in his hands, savouring the mere view and feel of it; then he slowly opened it and extracted an expensive-looking box. He admired the box as well before flipping up the cover. He swallowed. It was a beautiful watch with satiny black links and a black dial with four lines and two hands, like many muggle watches. He noticed that the watch had two buttons on the back. Curiously, he pressed one of them. He inhaled sharply as the lines vanished and were replaced with little stars and twelve hands.

"Most wizards receive a watch when they come of age at seventeen. I did not. Nor did you. It is high time that you had one," Severus said.

Harry was staring into his eyes, at a complete loss for words.

"It is not a cliché that Swiss watches are good," Severus added stiffly. He frequently spoke stiffly when trying to hide his embarrassment. "There is a wizarding watch manufacturer in Geneva, and I had your watch ordered there. This booklet will tell you all about the material and how to switch between muggle and wizarding watch faces, though you seem to have already guessed how-"

He was interrupted by two arms wrapping around his neck and a kiss on his thin cheek. Severus patted Harry's back and finally stroked the messy hair while Harry hugged him so tightly that Severus was starting to find breathing extremely difficult.

"Severus…I...This is…Oh, I don't know what to say! Thank you so much! It's exquisite!" Harry gushed, removing his old watch. "Will you put it on for me?"

He drew back, holding out his hand; Severus gently fastened the new watch around his wrist.

"Severus, you've spoilt me completely," Harry said. He ran his finger over the shiny black wristband and blinked back his tears.

"It's as black as your eyes. It's simply lovely," he breathed. Severus flushed. A lot. Harry, perceiving the colour, blushed himself.

"I have come to value the time I spend with you, Severus," he smiled, holding up his hand, the face of the watch turned towards Severus.

"One reason why I gave you that watch was to show my appreciation of the time spent in your company, Harry," Severus said softly, the rigidity gone from his voice. Harry could not help himself and hugged Severus again.

Severus discovered two things. Firstly, he enjoyed it when Harry embraced him, and, secondly, it made him feel more warmly than ever towards the spontaneous youth he had married. Simultaneously, a sharp pang of grief gnawed at him when he thought of the impending battle with Voldemort – and that they would divorce if they did survive. There was no way that Harry would ever want to be together with him…

Harry stood on the tip of his toes and pressed a long kiss to Severus's forehead, dispelling his momentary gloom.

"Thank you," he whispered, his eyes sparkling, "thank you so much. I'm having the time of my life."

There was no way at all…was there?

He noticed that Harry's blush was still there. In fact, Harry was quite a blusher.

"Why are you flushing like that?" he wanted to know.

"Well, your gaze is so…intense. Almost like you're practising Legilimency. And…" he moistened his lips.

"Yes?" Severus prompted.

"I like your eyes." How cold and dead your eyes used to be! Now they are warm, full of life and…dare I say, fondness for the Gryffindor brat you are married to? Harry added silently. Severus, who was rather charmed by Harry's answer, seemed to catch the thought and he smiled. He bowed his head a little so that their faces were on the same level.

"Allow me to return the compliment, Harry; you have inherited an exquisite characteristic from your mother – and more besides that." His voice was low, the words uttered quickly as if he was anxious for them to leave his lips before he changed his mind and held them back in case they sounded too stupid and sentimental.

You are wasting your hugs and smiles on me, on this stick you were forced to marry, Severus thought cynically, you deserve someone who is your equal….He wondered if Dumbledore, with his insight into human nature, had guessed that Severus and Harry would put aside the resentment they harboured towards each other? Did that make them equal?

Chapter 31

CHAPTER 31

Harry was sitting in Hagrid's hut, drinking tea with his friend. He was telling him about Severus and the watch.

Hagrid smiled as he looked at Harry's face.

"Ah, he wants ter tell yeh that he enjoys spending time with yeh now. And how could he not, eh? A nice lad like yeh. Am not surprised that yeh get on well now," Hagrid observed shrewdly.

The words and Hagrid's smile remained in Harry's mind as he slipped into Severus's laboratory; Severus had asked him to cut up magical evening primroses and water lilies, among other things, for an anti-aphrodisiac potion.

Although he knew and accepted that Potions lore would never be his forte, Harry was gradually learning more about potions and salves ever since Severus had started involving him in his Potions work and research. Before, he would simply cut up the ingredients and have it done with. Now, he was more interested and would look at the ingredients. Severus watched Harry keenly.

"What would happen if the water lilies were not added to this potion?" he asked briskly.

"Then the drinker would succumb to a sexual frenzy," Harry answered readily. The first time Severus had revealed this information to the class in Harry's seventh year, people had smirked and Harry himself had grinned. Severus had continued coldly:

"The drinker can be driven to such desperation that he or she – gender does not matter – will not hesitate to attack people, resulting in sexual harassment and rape. Brewers and people who knowingly stock such potions can look forward to a stint in Azkaban."

The smiles had faded, and Severus had deducted a large number points from Gryffindor.

"Correct," Severus said, handing Harry his silver knife. Their fingers touched, and Harry thought he saw something flash in Severus's eyes – something passionate and fiery; then Severus retreated to his cauldron, his hair tied back casually, a few tendrils still hanging in his face. He was perfectly familiar with brewing the potion – as with so many others – and could afford to concentrate on both Harry and the concoction in the cauldron. Watching clandestinely from behind the few strands of hair falling in his face, he followed Harry's movements. As if sensing his gaze, Harry looked away from the flowers he was chopping and glanced towards Severus, who instantaneously shifted his gaze back to his ladle and cauldron. The minutes passed. They were silent, absorbed in their work. When Harry had finished with the flowers, he turned and walked towards the store cupboard, legs moving smoothly, encased in a pair of old jeans. His equally old t-shirt clung to his body as he reached up and extracted a grater from the cupboard which contained working tools. It was becoming hot in the room. Harry had once attempted to adjust the temperature in the room, and Severus had snapped at him, telling him that it was his, Severus's, laboratory.

"It is hot and I'm finding it difficult to concentrate," Harry had retorted, whereupon Severus had curtly told Harry to mind his own business. This exchange had occurred during a disagreeable stage of their marriage, but Harry had not forgotten it, and Severus usually adjusted the temperature himself. This time, however, Severus decided to enjoy the sight of Harry sweating just a little. He wanted to see that soft blush spread over Harry's cheeks. The tongue come out to moisten those lips. To see him adjust his spectacles. To meet the green eyes when they sought his black ones, asking him silently to adjust the temperature. Severus was fortunate enough to soon witness these little things, from the blush to the eye contact. He himself was feeling hot, and it was not only due to their potion brewing. Harry stopped grating the bits of ginger he had taken from the store cupboard and went over to the sink in the corner to wash

his hands. He returned and began to knead the flowers and ginger in a bowl. After this was accomplished, Severus walked over to him and inspected the mixture. It smelt intriguing, but there was a fragrance which was more than intriguing. Harry's own smell stirred Severus's nostrils. Fresh sweat, like grass and rain; shower soap; and something else which stemmed from more abstract sources. An arousing combination of sensuality and innocence. It made Severus long to undress Harry and feel his naked body yield to his hands and tongue…

"Can you please fetch me the pestle?" he asked Harry. Harry obeyed and returned with the pestle. Their hands touched this time as well.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," Harry answered. Their eyes locked for a moment. Looks like I'll go into a sexual frenzy without a botched-up anti-aphrodisiac potion, Harry thought; then, realising that he was looking into the eyes of an extremely accomplished Legilimens, he averted his face and started settling the table at which he had worked. Severus ground a couple of sesame seeds with the pestle and added the powder to the mixture of water lilies, evening primroses and ginger. He carried the concoction to the cauldron and tipped in the contents.

"Thank you for your help. You may go if you wish," he said to Harry. The young man left.

Why does every touch and every look we share make me tingle all over? he mused. Can it be that I am starting to…fall in love…with… Severus Snape?

Harry went to his bedroom to change into fresh clothes, choosing another pair of jeans and a top Severus had bought him. He did not see his husband for the rest of the day; Severus had classes to teach and a staff meeting. When the Potions Master returned, he was irritated and curt, muttering about useless students and the lack of talent.

"I was not that good at Potions either," Harry reminded him, hoping to soothe Severus's dour mood.

"Yes, you definitely have a point," was the surly reply, "you have none of your mother's skill."

"Mom was good at Potions?" Harry said.

"Your father and godfather, too, but especially your mother."

Harry gazed at Severus for a few moments. He had often wondered about how Severus had regarded his mother. He had insulted her in the memory Harry had seen; but he had also noticed that Severus had always insulted Harry's father to his face – and never his mother. It was something he had realised around Christmas – when his and Severus's relationship had started to change for the better.

Severus seemed to guess his thoughts. He hesitated before taking Harry's hand in his.

"I know what you are thinking. That I insulted your mother. You, who have her eyes…" he stopped for a moment, then continued: "She was kind to everyone. She tried to be kind to me as well and prevent people from intimidating me. I turned to the Dark Arts instead. I mistook compassion for condescending pity and kindness for weakness. You, Harry, are compassionate and kind. Like your mother. And she was good at Potions. Very good. She could have easily become a Potions Mistress."

"Really?"

"Yes," Severus said, looking into the shining green eyes.

"I didn't inherit her Potions talent," Harry said with a little laugh.

"No, you obviously didn't," Severus agreed, amused.

Harry entwined his fingers with Severus's long ones.

"And from whom did you get your hands? These long fingers?"

"My mother." Severus's voice was slightly coated with bitterness. Harry regretted his question.

There was a pause.

"I have to go down to Hogsmeade and urgently buy some fresh scarabs and dragon scales," Severus announced somewhat abruptly.

"Okay," Harry said.

Severus reached the Apothecary just before the shop closed. He bought what he needed and stepped out into the street. Behind him, the shopkeeper began to lock up the place. It was dark, and Severus was both eager and reluctant to return to Harry and eat supper with him; eager because he now associated pleasant thoughts with Harry, and reluctant because of his confusing feelings towards his young husband. The way to Hogwarts was deserted. He was completely alone. Or not quite alone? A sense of dread stole over him, and he felt for his wand, his black eyes narrowing. He heard the intake of a familiar rattling breath, and something glided past him and brushed his face with a clammy hand.

"A Dementor!" he muttered underneath his breath. With a chill, he realised what this meant. Voldemort's arm was becoming longer and longer; he was sending Dementors near Hogwarts, near muggle and wizarding inhabitations to feed on people, and those who could not conjure Patronuses or who were not with someone who could conjure a Patronus were lost. Voldemort was sending them out to gain strength for the impending war. Severus whipped out his wand.

He thought of how Harry had put the chain around his neck. His right hand touched the jewellery while he pointed his wand at the approaching Dementor with his left hand.

" *Expecto Patronum* !" he shouted.

A Patronus shot out, blinding in its blazing silver beauty.

Severus stared. His Patronus was…different. He watched with wide eyes as it charged at the Dementors, making them scatter. It moved gracefully and lithely, like Harry did. Then it turned and ran towards him, and Severus inhaled sharply when he saw its face. It vanished. Severus shook his head. He had to see it again. He repeated the spell, and his black eyes were filled with tears in the glow of his new Patronus.

Severus was still in a state of shock, more about his Patronus than about the Dementors by the time he had returned to his dungeons. He was profoundly relieved to be an Occlumens and thus very well trained in self-control. He told Harry about the Dementor after supper – he did not want to ruin Harry's appetite. He did not, however, tell Harry about his Patronus.

"So the Dementors are spreading," Harry said. He was pale. "And it wanted to attack you…"

"Yes, it did. Dementors can be controlled by a Dark Witch or Wizard, and it would involve Dark Magic, which is what the Death Eaters do."

"So they do not recognise Death Eaters?"

"No, not specifically. I have to inform Albus about this. And kindly stop looking as if you had a potato up your posterior."

Harry blinked.

"I do not-"

Severus whisked out of their quarters. Harry glared after him.

Chapter 32

CHAPTER 32

A/N: About the "potato up your posterior" in chapter 31: it's not an established expression (at least not to my knowledge). My family uses it whenever I'm restless and start pacing up and down and can't sit down calmly. I also heard something similar in a theatre vignette starring Rowan Atkinson (I think he's trying to dance properly in a disco, and the commentator on the stage remarks that people should not dance like they've got something up their bottoms…)

And no, Severus's Patronus is NOT mentioned in the previous chapter. You'll find out about his Patronus in this chapter. In the last book, his Patronus is a doe (I won't say more. Spoilers). His Patronus is different in my story.

Severus was sitting in Dumbledore's office, sipping at a cup of steaming tea. They had discussed about the Dementors, and Severus had just one more piece of information to tell the Hogwarts Headmaster.

"My Patronus has changed, Albus," Severus said softly, "the Order will have to be informed of this."

"What shape does it take now, Severus?" Dumbledore asked, feeding Fawkes with ground almonds.

" *Expecto Patronum* !" Severus exclaimed. An enormous silver panther shot out of his wand-end. It walked majestically around the two wizards, and as it turned towards them, a scar shaped like a lightning bolt was clearly visible on its forehead before it dissolved.

Dumbledore looked into Severus's eyes.

"Does Harry know?"

Severus shook his head.

"He doesn't."

Dumbledore went over to Severus and gently placed his hand on his shoulder.

"You love him, don't you?"

Colour flooded Severus's pale face.

"If we manage to defeat Voldemort in a few months from now and live to tell the tale, then we will divorce," he said finally, "and Harry will be free to fall in love and marry whom he wants or not marry at all. He will find someone who is worthy of him."

"I think he has already found that someone, Severus," Dumbledore said, smiling. "Don't forget to tell him. And not only about your Patronus. I will inform the rest of the Order about the Dementors. I will leave it to you to tell them about your new Patronus. Good night, my dear boy."

"Good night, Albus."

When Severus returned, the hall was empty; Harry was taking a shower. Severus collapsed onto the sofa. Harry would have to be dreadfully obtuse if he didn't understand what the change of his Patronus implied. Harry had seen Tonks's Patronus change when she had fallen in love with Remus Lupin. He would surely put two and two together when Severus told him. Or perhaps Severus could simply say that his Patronus was a panther but not mention the scar. But what if Harry wanted to see the Patronus? He would surely ask to see it. It was perfectly natural. And if Severus rebuffed him and denied him the sight, then Harry would be surprised and hurt. Which was also perfectly natural. Severus felt the beginnings of a headache. There were a few books on the coffee table. Severus picked up one at random and swore softly when he realised that he was holding the book upside-down. When Harry padded into the hall,

hair still shower-moist, Severus pretended to be completely absorbed in his book. Harry sat down next to him.

"You're practically sleeping over that book. You'd better go to bed," Harry said with a little smile.

Severus shook his head. Harry knew that insisting that Severus go to bed would spark the man's quick temper and lead to sarcastic remarks. He therefore simply touched Severus's hand. It worked. Severus stretched a little and rose.

"May I ask you what you are doing out of bed yourself?" he asked dryly.

"Not being in bed," Harry answered.

"Are you trying to be witty?"

"No, just as factual as possible."

"That much is obvious," Severus observed, smoothing his robes and yawning delicately behind his palm.

"Oh, I wanted to give you this," Harry said, handing Severus a potato.

Severus's eyebrows clambered skywards.

"I managed to get it out of my ass," Harry said blandly.

"Harry Potter!"

"Sorry. Language. Extracting it out of my posterior proved to be a successful endeavour," Harry mock-corrected himself.

Severus glowered at his husband, sleepiness temporarily forgotten.

"You are talking nonsense!" he rapped out, thrusting the potato at Harry, who pushed it back at him and prodded it with his wand. It

began to sputter dangerously.

"What the-?" Severus started, letting go of the potato.

"A contribution from Fred and George," Harry grinned as the potato exploded in a shower of sparks, "couldn't resist using it since you so conveniently mentioned a potato."

The "potato" sputtered again and disintegrated with a loud bang.

"Bed!" Severus ordered, thoroughly indignant while Harry laughed heartily.

"Only if you go to bed first."

"No, you are going to bed first."

"No, *you* are going to bed first," Harry quipped.

Severus hoisted Harry up in his arms.

"Hey! That's cheating!" Harry protested. It reminded him of the scene when Severus had carried him out of Gryffindor Tower, all the while bearing up with Harry's outraged protests.

"You will kindly stop behaving like a small child-"

"There's a child in every adult," Harry pointed out.

"Please exclude me."

"Of course. I forgot. You're not an adult," Harry grinned. Severus pressed Harry against his body and looked deeply into his eyes.

"I assure you that I am very much an adult," he breathed to Harry, his mouth close to Harry's. Their gazes strove with each other, both wizards determined to not look away. Severus slowly let Harry slide down from his arms.

"You're a little heavier than when I carried you from Gryffindor Tower," he remarked. "It is high time you put on weight and were less skinny. And you are still a growing teen."

"Well, whatever weight I'd put on at Hogwarts would disappear during my summer stay at the Dursleys," Harry said in a joking tone, but his eyes were grave.

"Now you're with me, and I am making sure that you eat properly."

"You eat very little yourself."

"I am used to small quantities, and I left my teenage years behind me a rather long time ago. But you can still change your eating habits. You are young."

"So are you," Harry said. Severus shook his head.

"I attended this school with your parents, Harry. How can you possibly regard me as young?"

"I have spent many months with you, Severus. You have included me in your life and share it with me every day. I have seen you smile and laugh; and all the time you are fighting against Voldemort to protect the wizarding world and me. You can be very passionate in what you do."

"Passionate?"

"Does that sound too un-Slytherin?" Harry teased him.

Severus stooped and whispered into Harry's ear:

"Believe me when I say that Slytherins, too, can be very…very…very…passionate."

He drew back. Harry stood on tiptoe and approached his mouth to Severus's ear:

"So can Gryffindors."

"Indeed," Severus said, his voice tinged with huskiness. He placed his hands on Harry's waist and began to move his feet and body musically.

"Are we dancing?"

"Sort of," Severus replied. "I don't know how to dance, actually."

"Neither do I."

"I remember your performance at the Yule Ball in excruciating detail," Severus remarked scathingly.

Harry laughed, one hand on Severus's shoulder and the other on his back.

Their eye contact became increasingly intense and probing, slowing down their swaying movements until they stood still in the middle of the hall, their faces close enough to touch. Harry's knees suddenly seemed soft. The whole room seemed to be holding its breath. Harry searched Severus's black eyes for answers. He noted the slight flush in the thin cheeks.

Severus hesitated. Then he released Harry abruptly.

"Good night," he said.

"Good night," Harry replied. When he slipped into bed, his heart was still beating quickly. He was both exhilarated and tremendously disappointed. If only he had been quicker and used Severus's hesitation to seal that tiny distance between them…But what if Severus had rejected him? Pushed him away? Shouted at him? Maybe it was better this way…And their marriage was supposed to be one of convenience…

Severus rose very early the next morning to avoid Harry and to have some time to think about his feelings. He had breakfast in his

bedroom and went down into the grounds. The air was cold and crisp with the lingering freshness of dawn. He visited his sanctuary and listened to the wind chimes while he mulled over his marriage. How strange it all was! It had been a terrible start. The ceremony, the consummation, their violent arguments…and then, it had started to change. He had realised that Harry had interesting questions and conversation. That he expressed things by sketching and drawing. That when he smiled, everything became warm and bright. That he was loyal to Severus, defending him and standing by him. That he was not only handsome but smart, kind and…sweet. Severus could not think of any better word than "sweet". When had his heartbeat started accelerate whenever Harry entered the room? Whenever their hands or bodies happened to brush? Whenever Harry looked at him with those green eyes and smiled? Whenever he touched Harry's chain around his neck? He touched it again, closing his eyes; and he knew that he loved Harry very much, loved him more than he had ever loved anyone before. Seeing Harry's smile or hearing him laugh or looking into his beautiful green eyes was just what he needed to start the day and end it. He stood up and hurried back to the castle, making sure to replenish the birdhouse with seeds before he left. He had a long day of classes ahead of him.

When he returned to his rooms in the evening, silence greeted him. Annoyed, he remembered that Harry had told him that he would be in Gryffindor Tower with Ginny and her friends. Severus consulted his watch. The dungeon rooms were too still without Harry. Severus glanced towards Harry's bedroom. The door was ajar. He hesitated, wondering if he would be breaching Harry's privacy by standing on the threshold and simply looking inside. He overcame his hesitation and opened the door wider. The spacious room was very neat except for the portfolio of sketches lying on the table. Severus examined its contents. It was evident that his husband had talent and plenty of creativity besides a good tutor. A picture fluttered out and fell lightly upon the floor. He bent and picked it up. It was a simple sketch in black and white. The silhouette of a person was kneeling on the floor. There was a cavity on the left side of its chest, and its extracted heart was lying near its knee in a pool of black

blood. Further away, a tall slim shadow with long hair had its back turned towards the scene, arms crossed upon its chest. The poignancy of the sketch made Severus's hands falter for a moment. The depiction of complete exposure in the face of total imprisonment of the heart, and thus feelings – for what else could the protective arms folded upon the chest signify? – was skilfully rendered. And was it an illusion that the kneeling silhouette resembled Harry with its messy hair? And the tall figure looked like him, Severus Snape… Could it be that Harry…? Not daring to complete the thought, Severus went through the remaining sketches in the portfolio. Then he looked at his husband's bed. Harry always made his own bed instead of leaving this task to the house elves. The bedclothes were fresh, taken from the cupboard where the house elves put the washed linen. He imagined Harry sharing his, Severus's, bed. He pictured himself looking into those green eyes…kissing that soft mouth…whispering into his ear... A photo album on the shelf caught his eye. He reached up and grasped it. It contained pictures of Harry's parents. He recalled that Harry had told him about Hagrid's gift. He leafed pensively through the pages and stared for a long time at a picture of Lily and James holding hands, smiling and waving at the camera.

"What would you say if you knew what I feel for Harry?" he asked them softly. He looked at Lily's green eyes.

"Your son is brave, strong-willed and very talented. And, above all, he is kind."

Lily waved at him.

"Thank you, both of you. For Harry."

He closed the picture album carefully and replaced it. He remembered that he still had to tell Harry about his Patronus. Harry was a Member of the Order of the Phoenix, after all, and Patronuses were one of the main ways the Order communicated. Harry loved to tease Severus by sending his stag Patronus to visit him randomly in the evenings. Severus, in turn, would dispatch his Ashwinder

Patronus with some sarcastic repartee...Except that his Patronus was no longer an Ashwinder. Severus left Harry's room.

Chapter 33

CHAPTER 33

A few days passed, but Severus still didn't tell Harry about his new Patronus. Telling Harry would expose him and his feelings – he was sure of this. And Harry would be horrified. Disgusted. Point out that Severus was truly Voldemort's tool and as perverse as Voldemort wanted him to be. Maybe he would even think of their bonding night and call him a rapist. Severus's chest tightened at such thoughts, even though a small voice struggled to be heard in his pessimism, whispering to him that Harry would not react like that at all. That Harry liked him. More than liked him. That Harry teased him and had not protested one bit to his flirting – quite the contrary…And why had Dumbledore seemed so positive? Severus shook his head. The wizard with his unique insight into human feelings had known. He had stated more than asked Severus whether he loved Harry; and Severus Snape, the cool composed Potions Master, the skilled Occlumens, had been unable to deny it. Or to prevent the transformation of his Patronus. Severus brought his fist down on his desk. He would go to Harry. Now. And tell him about the Patronus; and if Harry dared to ask more questions, then he would make sure that Harry would not utter them. He was Severus Snape, and he knew how to make people fall silent. But Harry was not "people".

In the meantime, Harry was doing some thinking of his own. He had somehow or the other managed to fall in love with the forbidding Potions Master. They had come close to kissing more than once. He did not dare hope that Severus could possibly feel the same way towards him, but if he didn't try, didn't attempt to take a step forwards, then Harry would never know, and time was running out. He would soon have to confront Voldemort. He wanted Severus to know about his feelings beforehand, even if he ran the risk of being thoroughly rejected and perhaps shattering their friendship in the bargain. Severus could force Veritaserum down his throat, and Harry

would not be able to change the truth. A familiar knock on the door made his heartbeat accelerate.

Severus knocked on the door. He was not at all nervous. He was calm and composed as usual. At least, that was what he was trying to tell himself.

"Come in," Harry called melodiously. Severus opened the door wide and entered. Harry was on his bed, reading. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and his bare feet were buried in the bedspread. It seemed unjust that this blooming young man was his husband and had to carry so many burdens upon his shoulders instead of enjoying his life. Then again, Harry seemed very happy and comfortable around Severus. In fact, he was smiling at him now. He slid off the bed and placed his hands on Severus's shoulders, looking into his eyes. A blush had spread over his cheeks. They studied each other. Harry kissed Severus softly on the forehead. And on his curved nose. On his chin. His cheeks. Severus did not move; his eyes, however, revealed his inner tempest. It was completely still in the room. Like when they had been dancing, everything seemed to be holding its breath in anticipation. Green eyes and black eyes locked together in questions, demanding answers. Then Harry's lips met Severus's in the sweetest of kisses, timid, but bearing promise of more kisses to follow. Severus closed his eyes, determined to cherish the moment and its memory for as long as possible, his lips refusing to let go of Harry's. Harry was kissing him and he was kissing him back. They drew back a little, eyes locking. Severus leant his body against Harry's, and they slowly lay down on the bed, Harry delighted and delirious as they resumed their kissing. Severus positioned his body between Harry's thighs. His hands squeezed Harry's shoulders as he kissed Harry with rising passion, finally slipping his tongue into the enthusiastic fresh mouth, where an equally enthusiastic tongue welcomed him. They were locked in another passionate kiss when a searing pain on his left forearm distracted him. Harry immediately recognised the blank expression on Severus's face. He cradled Severus's head against his chest, and Severus sighed. Then he sat up briskly.

"I have to go," he said reluctantly, flushed and breathing fast.

"Come back soon, Severus," Harry whispered, giving him a tight hug, "and take care."

"I will."

He gave Harry a lingering look and walked out of the room, wrapping his cloak closely around his person.

In his room, Harry was completely overwhelmed. He repeatedly ran his finger across his lips. He could hardly believe it. The expression in Severus's dark eyes…the feelings and the aliveness in them…He went to the library and attempted to read, without success. He tried to practise Duelling moves. He gave up. Those kisses…He sat down despondently on Severus's favourite sofa, and Severus's shirt draped over a chair caught his eye. He stood up and took the shirt in his hands. He pressed his face into the soft material and inhaled the scent of its wearer. Still carrying the shirt, he went back to the library and searched frantically through the commode where Severus kept important papers. He finally found what he was looking for. He left the library five minutes later, stuffing something determinedly into his pocket. His face was set. He went over to the sofa and folded Severus's shirt deftly, cradled it against his cheek one last time before depositing it carefully on the chair over which it had been thrown. He went over to the shelf on which the vial containing his and Severus's blood stood. He took it reverently in his hands, gazing at the dark-red liquid. Then he put it back and ran his finger over his wedding band, smiling. He glanced at his watch for the umpteenth time; he could not stand it any longer; he could not wait for Severus to return to their rooms; he had to go and see him immediately. He ran out of their rooms, rushed up the stairs and out of the castle. He was out of breath by the time he reached the edge of the grounds, where Severus usually Disapparated. Once on the spot, he alternated between twisting his hands and fiddling with the hems of his sleeves, pacing up and down, waiting for Severus to Apparate. Finally, there was a familiar sound of someone Apparating; Severus

had arrived at last. Harry turned around, looking into the black eyes. Severus was tired and pale.

"Harry," he said, surprised, the tiredness gone.

Harry took Severus's face in his hands and kissed him warmly on the mouth.

The kiss was firm, infused with the sweetness of love and the charm of innocence.

Severus was still, overwhelmed by the spontaneity of Harry's kiss. Then he returned the kiss gently and drew back, searching for answers in Harry's green eyes.

Harry reached into his pocket, extracting many torn scraps of parchment.

"The divorce forms," he said. "I tore them up while you were gone. I want to stay with you, if you'll have me."

He opened his palm, and the fragments fluttered away.

"Will you have me, Severus?"

Severus's face was flushed.

"What…what exactly are you trying to tell me, Harry?" he asked slowly.

"That I love you, of course," Harry said, sounding annoyed.

"Harry," he whispered, holding his husband close to him, "I love you too. But are you sure that I am what you want, Harry? That you wish to remain married and bonded to me, a difficult man?"

"Yes," Harry said, his eyes sparkling. "You wouldn't be Severus Snape if you weren't difficult. Gryffindors quite like challenges."

"In that case…" Severus whispered, kissing Harry's forehead and raising Harry's fringe, disclosing the scar.

"In that case…?" Harry prompted, recognising the same dialogue from their snowball fight.

"In that case…"

"Yes?"

"In that case, I have to show you something."

"Show me."

"My Patronus has changed. Now it is a panther, and it has your scar on its forehead."

"Your Patronus has changed? Because of me? It has my scar?"

Dumbledore watched as a proud panther and a stately falcon sped towards the castle, the latter flying protectively above the former. When they melted away, he saw the silhouettes of two wizards, one tall and the other less tall, standing together in an embrace. They separated and clasped hands, heading slowly for the castle. Fawkes stretched his neck questioningly as a loud blast of muggle disco music filled the Headmaster's office. Phineas Black promptly took this as a signal to visit Grimmauld Place and entertain the empty room over there with scathing remarks about Dumbledore's taste in music. Dumbledore rummaged for a mango Popsicle.

"Two Patronus changes to report to the Order, my dear bird!" he chuckled. Fawkes resignedly dissolved into flames.

Chapter 34

CHAPTER 34

A/N: some of you felt that the kissing and love confession between Harry and Severus came too fast/suddenly. It is meant to be rushed. Severus is going to Death Eater meetings, and the time when Harry will have to confront Voldemort is nearing. Although Harry knows how skilled Severus is, he is nevertheless very worried about him; many things have to be done fast and unexpectedly because of Voldemort's influence on people's lives. People can no longer take their time. Considering that Harry is an impulsive Gryffindor, he will, in spite of his thoughtfulness and maturity in this story, still do emotional things spontaneously.

AND NO, this story as not yet over at all!

When Nessa saw Severus and Harry holding hands, she took one look of them and crawled out of her portrait, her hissing staccato chuckle still echoing in the empty frame. Severus and Harry walked into their rooms. They leant towards each other and shared a kiss.

"Another one," Harry said, standing, raising his face for a second kiss.

"Are you that starved for physical affection?" Severus asked with a glint of humour in his black eyes.

"I feel so wonderful when you kiss me," Harry explained with disarming innocence. Severus smiled.

"I feel wonderful hearing that assessment," he murmured, giving Harry another kiss.

"You know…I was scared that you would be angry that I had torn up the divorce forms…that you might think me presumptuous."

"I daresay your subconscious absorbed whatever tender feelings I happened to reveal towards you, however much I tried to hide them from you. You must have had a certain sense of security if not of certainty. Also, you were not sorted into Gryffindor for nothing. You were bound to do something bordering on foolishly brave and imprudent."

Harry laughed merrily.

"I didn't realise how empty the dungeons were until I heard your laughter," Severus remarked. They stood close to each other in silence for a few moments.

"How did the meeting go?" Harry inquired softly.

Severus's already thin lips thinned even more.

"The Dark Lord…Voldemort…is eager to see you in July. He thinks it would be an excellent way of celebrating your birthday."

"Thirty-first of July, then. You said his name."

"Yes. I did," Severus said impassively.

Harry smiled.

"About high time."

Severus made a dour sound and gave Harry a gentle push.

An odd noise of several voices coming from the door distracted them. Frowning, Severus went over and opened it. Harry was amused and surprised to see that Nessa was not alone in her portrait. In fact, it was bulging with subjects who had deserted their other pictures and were all trying to fit into Nessa's portrait.

"Congratulations! We are celebrating your true union with Severus Snape!" Nessa said to Harry in Parseltongue, clinging to her pestle

with all her might while a monk tried to dislodge her by pulling at her tail. Harry translated Nessa's words for Severus, who rolled his eyes.

Harry grinned.

"Thank you, Nessa," Severus said in a bored tone.

Nessa bowed her head at Severus and winked at him.

"It seems that the guardian of our quarters is celebrating rather heartily," Severus commented as he closed the door.

"Have you still got some of that elf-made wine? We've got to drink to our 'true union', as Nessa called it."

They went over to the sofa, and Severus Summoned the bottle of wine and two elegant wine glasses. Severus poured a small quantity for both of them.

"To us," Severus said gravely, raising his glass. The two wizards had dinner together. Harry nudged Severus's foot underneath the table from time to time. Severus, who had never been so close to someone before, found this embarrassing and annoying at first; but he finally nudged Harry's foot back tentatively.

As the days passed, both Harry and Severus gradually became used to the new intimacy between them and to expressing physical affection. Particularly Severus, who was not demonstrative, was unfamiliar with such a close relationship. It struck him as ironic that he had slept with Harry on his bonding night and knew nothing at all about how Harry would respond to caresses of an increasingly intimate nature. He also knew that time was short, especially for them; Voldemort's reign was putting pressure on people's lives, making them try to enjoy as much as they could in as little time as possible, for they did not know if they would survive to see the next month, the next week, or even the next day while the Death Eaters murdered and frightened everyone who did not correspond to their distorted view of the world. Nevertheless, Severus and Harry were

aware that rushing a relationship would be the worst thing they could do. Also, they had the distinct advantage of being members of a powerful Order which kept an eye on Voldemort's moves. And, of course, they had met him in person; his weaknesses were evident at moments when he tried to display the maximum force of his powers.

In the meantime, Harry had informed his friends of the happy news; Remus had sent them a calm note expressing his gladness; Mrs Weasley dispatched a staggering assortment of sweets and insisted that both spend Easter at The Burrow with the rest of the family and family friends. Hermione was delighted, and Ron appalled but accepting ("Your husband will never really be my cup of tea, but if you two manage to survive together, then don't forget that you're both invited to Easter!").

"In a week from now," Severus said, scanning Mrs Weasley's invitation. Harry thought he looked vaguely uncomfortable. He is not used to receiving invitations, he remembered.

"Yes, it'll be fun!" he said aloud, giving Severus a hug.

It was indeed fun, especially for Harry. Severus, who did not appreciate society and gatherings, remained on his guard, though he made an effort to be civil and less stiff. Hermione beamed at them, offering them her congratulations. The best part, however, was the fact that Severus and Harry were to share not only a bedroom but also a bed.

"They are married," Mrs Weasley said, noticing Ron's shocked face. Hermione immediately piped up:

"Nowadays unmarried people also share beds. Domestic partnerships, for instance-"

Ron suppressed a yawn while Hermione went on. She broke off and glared at him.

"It is all very fine for you to yawn, Ron. You do know that same-sex partners are actually forbidden to marry in most countries?" she snapped. "Luckily, Wizarding Britain is more tolerant in at least that respect."

She gave Harry and Severus a warm smile as she helped Mrs Weasley set the table.

"Hermione has a very good point," Remus said, watching Tonks transform her pink hair into long red hair.

"As always," Ron grumbled. Then, looking at Harry and Severus:

"Be easy on the bed and keep the volume down."

"RONALD WEASLEY!" Hermione and Mrs Weasley shouted at the same time.

Severus and Harry were both rather nervous about sharing a bed together. When they stood in their little room in The Burrow, dressed in their pyjamas, Harry looked at Severus, suddenly shy.

"Do you mind that we're sharing a bed? I mean, we're not going to do anything, are we, er, we're just going to sleep, I mean we're not going to-"

Severus could not help himself. Seeing the brave Gryffindor fumble for appropriate words was too funny, and he laughed. Harry began to laugh as well.

"No, Harry. We are not going to have sex just yet. Though…" he stopped laughing and looked away from Harry, "I would not blame you if you never wanted to have sex with me after the consummation."

Harry took Severus's face in his hands.

"Severus, when will you stop feeling guilty?"

"There are times when I feel like a rapist, especially when I have to meet Voldemort and show him obscenities involving you and me. I know that you have forgiven me, but I find it especially hard to forgive myself."

"Rapist? Severus, you are starting to make me angry. For the umpteenth time: *we* had to do it. Not just me. It must have been harder for you. You had to…perform, so to say. You decided to protect me in spite of all. I love you. I trust you. Do you think I could love and trust you otherwise?"

"I slapped you the next day, and I broke your arm during that argument in my bedroom," Severus muttered.

"It was an accident. You didn't do it on purpose. I fell, and then I broke my arm. As for the slap...I was accusing you very unjustly. Severus…it was a really tough time for us both, but look where we are now."

Severus's eyes cleared.

As soon as they had slipped into bed, the timidity fell away from them; Harry snuggled up to Severus, who draped his arm around his shoulders and kissed his temple. The Potions Master smiled in the dark, finding it hard to believe that he was sharing a bed with someone he loved; that love had come to him, of all people, at last.

Chapter 35

CHAPTER 35

A/N: Pehico: Harry felt rushed into telling Severus about his feelings, but the two want to take it slow(er) when it comes to being physically intimate, especially after their unpleasant consummation. The most important thing (and this is the reason why it was a rush) was that they confessed their love for each other. The pace slow/fast will cause problems, though, and you'll find out more in this chapter.

Bright rays of Easter Monday sun sparkled through the shuttered windows. Harry opened his eyes. There was something warm next to him. Or rather, someone warm. Harry rubbed his eyes and rolled over onto his side. Severus was lying on his side as well, his back towards Harry. Harry snuggled his cheek into a patch of black hair lying on the pillow. It was as silky as Severus's voice. He stretched and tiptoed his way out of bed, glancing at the clock as he scuttled to the bathroom – seven A.M. Usually, it was Severus who got up early. Well, there's a first time for everything, Harry grinned to himself.

Severus opened his eyes and discovered an empty space next to him. It was still warm, and he discovered a single dark hair on Harry's pillow. It was black, like his own hair. Severus picked it up and twirled it lazily in his fingers. When hairs were on the head, they were an object of admiration. As soon as they left the scalp, they were regarded as disgusting things by people. Severus held up Harry's hair and came to the conclusion that he liked it anyway even though it had parted with its usual residence. There was a loud clang from the bathroom as Harry dropped something, and Severus was sure that he heard his husband assess the situation with a hearty four-letter word. Soon, the door opened, and a shower-fresh figure dressed in jeans and a light jumper issued forth. Severus Snape was not a morning person; but today, he found himself appreciating the

first minutes away from the unconsciousness of sleep. He sat up in bed, and Harry turned.

"Good morning, Sev," he said happily.

"Sev?"

"I thought of it during my shower. It reminds me of the number seven, which is considered magical."

"Such morning flatteries," Severus murmured. "But if it should relieve the tangling of your tongue whenever you utter my full name, then you may abbreviate it in your radical fashion."

"How do you manage to speak like a professor when you've just woken up?" Harry asked, amused. His pillow, propelled by a non-verbal spell, flew towards him. Harry managed to catch it cleanly, his Duelling and Quidditch reflexes instantly in action.

"Wow, and you sure know how warm up your magic after sleeping!" Harry laughed, tossing the pillow back at Severus, who scrambled out and made a beeline for the bathroom. Harry was not offended. He knew that Severus was more open to conversation after freshening up and eating breakfast. They went down together and were given plates stuffed with fried eggs, bacon, tasty sausages and mushrooms by Mrs Weasley and Lupin. Conversation began to flow steadily and warmly as people filled their stomachs. They were not idle on Easter Monday, however. The young people went out to de-gnome the garden while the others discussed, in low voices, about Voldemort and how to foil his plans.

"So, Harry, how was it with Snape?" Ron asked. Hermione frowned.

"You mean, sharing a bed?"

"What else, mate?"

"Ron!" Hermione snapped. Ginny smirked behind her veil of red hair.

"Come on, Ron, that's personal." Harry answered.

"Shy? Or no action?" Ron asked, looking sceptical. Hermione threw a gnome at his head.

"Hey, I was only kidding! You think I want to really know every detail about that greasy – I mean-"

A gnome left Harry's hand and thumped him smartly in the ribs.

"My husband is not greasy!" Harry growled. There was a snicker from the Weasley twins.

When Harry moved out of earshot, Fred whispered to Ron:

"Don't worry, little brother, they slept like angels."

"How would you know?" Ron whispered back.

"Extendable Ears," George explained succinctly.

Hermione stared at them, shocked. Ron, too, looked rather taken aback.

"How can you possibly spy on people's private lives like that?" Hermione bristled.

"Hey, it's Snape, Hermy, don't get so worked up."

"It is Harry and Professor Snape, you two, and you have no right to eavesdrop like that! It's completely shameless of you!"

"Ah, they just meant…er…well," Ron said, trying to be diplomatic. The twins rolled their eyes and Hermione sniffed haughtily. She marched away resolutely and de-gnomed a patch of garden a safe distance away from her boyfriend and the twins. Ginny, too, was no longer amused and joined her. Harry was happily oblivious of the conversation concerning his love life.

When Harry and Severus returned to Hogwarts in the evening, Harry found himself wondering about the bed-sharing arrangements in their rooms. He had felt very happy and comfortable sharing a bed with Severus. Safe. Protected. Loved.

"Sev?" he asked timidly.

"Yes, Harry?" Severus looked at him probingly.

"How was it for you to share a bed with me?" he asked cautiously, trying to make sure that he was on safe territory.

"It was quite passable," Severus replied, looking amused.

Silence.

"Oh. Okay."

"What are you trying to get at, my subtle one?" Severus asked shrewdly.

"Well…would you mind repeating the experience?"

"Harry, I think it would be better if we did not share a bed. It was simply a makeshift arrangement at The Burrow, and although we are in a relationship and married, I would prefer sleeping separately."

"Okay. Well…Fine," Harry said.

"You are not happy," Severus remarked.

"It was nice sharing a bed with you. Different, and nice. I felt really good. What about you?"

"I would prefer not to rush things."

"We don't have much time anyways, do we?" Harry said, his voice becoming hard.

"I would think that you would understand what damage rushing can do after-"

"-our consummation, I know," Harry finished his sentence.

"Obviously, we do not agree on the topic of bed-sharing," Severus commented.

"No, no, you're right, we had better sleep separately," Harry said briskly, giving him a smile and kiss on the cheek. He turned to go.

"Harry. Wait."

Harry looked at him.

"I do not want to force you to do something you don't want to."

"Sev, if I had not wanted to share a bed with you, I would have told you."

Severus nodded.

That night, they slept alone in their beds. The night after that, Severus heard a knock on his bedroom door and opened it to reveal a blushing Harry. He wordlessly took the young man's hand and led him to his bed, and they slept innocently next to each other. From then onwards, Harry would repeat this little procedure twice a week, preferring Wednesday and Saturday nights. Severus was happy to have Harry in his bed until the youth's presence began to have unintentional effects on his body – and mind. He began to long to touch Harry intimately, to caress him all over, to take him in his mouth and taste him, to make him come. By the time it was May, Severus was becoming sexually frustrated. Harry and he indulged in a lot of hugging and kissing, but neither dared to take the next step and explore what was underneath the robes and clothes. Severus was still haunted by his previous behaviour towards Harry; and Harry was haunted by Severus's guilt; he could read it in the black eyes whenever they were on the verge of becoming more intimate. So

when Severus told him bluntly that he no longer wanted Harry in his bed, Harry, who was becoming even more frustrated (and not only sexually) than Severus, lost his temper.

Chapter 36

CHAPTER 36

"You had better stop sleeping in my bed," Severus informed Harry stiffly and coldly one evening. Harry tried to mask the hurt he felt; it was more the tone and the manner than the actual words which stung him.

"Why, Sev?" he asked calmly.

"There is not enough place in my bed for you," the Potions Master said curtly, not looking at Harry.

"Do you mean that literally or figuratively? Why do I have the feeling that it's the latter?" Harry said.

"Because I want it that way."

"Then why are you not looking me in the eye?"

Severus turned and fixated him with his black eyes.

"I don't want you in my bed anymore, and that's all you need to know," he said with a sneer Harry had not seen for a long time.

"You are talking to me like you used to before Christmas," Harry snapped, his temper rising, "and I want to know the reason."

"It is not healthy for a young boy of your age to share a bed with someone who is old enough to be your father."

"That's the lamest excuse I have ever heard," Harry said flatly, his cheeks becoming flushed with anger, "and lying at this stage of our relationship is really not to my taste, Severus. I don't need to be a Legilimens to know that you're trying to hide something from me."

"You are a mere boy. I am many years your senior. I cannot expect you to understand my wish."

Harry exploded.

"I am not a 'mere boy', and you are talking to me as if I were someone of limited intelligence!" he said glacially, suppressing the urge to shout.

"Fine, Harry Potter. Do you want to share a bed with someone who has to rape you in visions created for the Dark Lo – for Voldemort's pleasure?"

"I am sick of discussing the same old issue with you!" Harry shouted. The temperature around them seemed to become warmer with simmering magic.

Harry approached Severus, his face nearly touching the Potions Master's.

"Tell me, and talk to me like to the adult I am," he hissed.

"You are a source of…" Severus paused, hesitating, then continued: "a source of distraction in my bed. Tell me, Harry. Do you want me touching you all over? My hands on your skin? My disgusting presence literally inside you?"

"What are you trying to tell me?" Harry asked impatiently, breathing hard. "What's this shit with 'disgusting presence'?"

"I am a sexual being, in case you haven't noticed, my dear Potter," Severus spat.

"So am I, my dear Snape. Are we having this ridiculous argument because you want to touch me more intimately? Because you think I'll feel revolted by your touch when we're both in your bed?"

Severus was silent. Harry gave him a rigid stare of contempt.

"So this is how much you trust me."

"You are too young, you are naturally eager to explore your sexuality in spite of your first unpleasant experience, you think that-"

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT I SHOULD THINK!" Harry stormed. "YOU'VE WRITTEN A COMPLETE SCRIPT WHERE MY THOUGHTS ARE CONCERNED! LOOKS LIKE I HAVE TO THINK WHAT YOU EXPECT ME TO THINK!"

"Harry, I-"

"YOU HAVE SUCH A POOR OPINION OF YOURSELF THAT YOU'RE BOUND TO HAVE AN EVEN WORSE OPINION OF ME, OF COURSE!" Harry continued shouting. Severus opened his mouth to protest, but Harry was faster:

"FINE! I WON'T CONTAMINATE YOUR BED ANYMORE… because…" here he lowered his voice, "I am obviously corrupting you, am I not?"

"You have no idea what it is like to invent obscene images about you and me, about me hurting you!" Severus snarled.

"Those are FAKE MEMORIES! When will you get REAL for once?" Harry bellowed.

"I…Look…" Severus actually moistened his lips, and his eyes were glittering feverishly. "Yes, you are not a boy. You are a man. And when you lie next to me in my bed, when I feel you pressed against me – like this-" he gently pulled Harry against his body, "then you have no idea how I long to…kiss and taste you all over!"

Harry wrapped his arms around Severus's waist.

"In other words…you want to become more intimate with me."

Severus reddened as if with shame.

Harry began to laugh; his anger evaporated.

"And you chucked me out of bed because of that? Because you were so convinced that I would think you're a pervert or something? Severus Snape, you can be such a moron at times! You've got learn to talk to me about all this."

"I…Well…" Severus sounded suspiciously like a little boy.

"We are lovers. I've been longing for you in the same way for quite some time."

"Why didn't you make the first move, brave Gryffindor?" Severus asked sarcastically.

"I was planning to, but I couldn't think of a way which was subtle enough. You're so fond of subtlety, and I wasn't sure how to, you know, make my move."

"To hell with subtlety," Severus said in the most un-Slytherin manner, kissing Harry on the mouth. Harry returned the kiss and drew back a little to look at Severus's face.

"I'm sorry," Severus murmured.

"You had better be," Harry said strictly, amused at the turn their fierce argument had taken. He had certainly not expected it to end in a kiss.

"It has become second nature to me to doubt, to not trust so willingly," Severus added.

"Kindly exclude me from your second nature," Harry quipped.

"I will," Severus reassured him. Harry boldly moved his hand lower, touching the curve of Severus's behind fleetingly. Severus responded by kissing him again and shifting the collar of Harry's t-shirt to reveal more of his neck. His lips brushed the peach-soft area, and Harry's mouth opened in a moan. He stretched his neck to give

Severus's mouth more skin to kiss. Severus felt Harry lean into him, and he became aware of Harry's hard arousal. He also became aware of the gentle rubbing motions Harry's hips were making against his own hips. He understood that Harry wanted him to know how much he, Severus, was arousing him.

Not one of the men with whom he had shared meaningless intimacy had ever shown such desire for him. He watched Harry's face with a feeling verging on incredulity: the flushed cheeks, the half-closed eyes, the fast breathing escaping his lips…Those lips…Severus kissed them and Harry responded heatedly. Then it was time for Harry to leave for his lessons with Moody and McGonagall.

"Come to my bed tonight," Severus whispered into Harry's ear.

"I will," Harry replied.

When Harry slipped into his room that night, Severus was lying in bed expecting him. The book he had been reading before Harry joined him was lying abandoned on the bedside table; and for the very first time, he drew back the bed sheets as his young husband approached the bed. Usually, Severus would be reading when Harry came to his bed and would only spare him a quick glance when he slid underneath the sheets. This time, his full attention was on Harry. A quick " *Nox* !", and they were lying in warm darkness. The dark made every kiss and caress even more intense and unexpected. After a while, Severus felt Harry's slight form move panther-like on top of him. A bold hand touched his inner thigh, and Severus inhaled sharply.

"Harry," he whispered.

"Am I going too fast?" Harry asked softly.

"Merlin, no! Don't stop!"

Fingers brushed his hard sex. Severus's hips tingled and quivered. He reached down and covered Harry's exploring hand with his.

"Please show me," he told Harry. Harry's hand moved underneath his, and his own palm and fingers followed its movements. Severus started to writhe and pant as his control vanished; he could feel Harry's warm breath against his neck and those agile fingers teasing him through his pyjama trousers and underwear. A little later, he came in Harry's embrace with a stifled cry of pleasure. They lay together silently; then Harry breathed to him:

"Next time you're going to share *my* bed, Sev."

Chapter 37

CHAPTER 37

A/N: MERRY CHRISTMAS! This is your Snarry gift ;-) Hope you like it!

Harry ran the comb one last time through Severus's thick black hair and reached out for the handsome wooden brush Severus had bought after the wedding. He smoothened the dark tresses with the brush for three or four minutes before stepping back. Severus rose, drew Harry close to him and kissed his forehead.

"Thank you," he said.

Harry grinned.

"It's time I came across hair which is not as stubborn as mine," he remarked.

Severus's eyes glinted.

"The lack of stubbornness is misleading if you go beyond my hair," he murmured to Harry.

"Oh yes, very misleading indeed," Harry agreed.

He loved the teasing conversations between them and knew that Severus appreciated them equally.

"Remember that I will be sharing your bed tonight, my panther, and I will show you just how stubborn I can be," Severus reminded him.

Harry quirked an eyebrow at him.

"It is very difficult to forget about our bed-sharing arrangements."

"Excellent," Severus replied, releasing Harry and settling his teaching robes.

"Wonderful, your students are going to be particularly scared of you this morning," Harry joked.

Severus snorted and swept out of their rooms, hooked nose as arrogant as ever. Harry smiled and put away the brush and comb. He thought of their last night together. How he had pleasured Severus through his clothes. How Severus had come in his arms, the heat radiating off his skin in delectable waves…

Harry was lying in bed expectantly. Sure enough, a gentle knock soon made him look eagerly at the door. Severus stepped inside, a housecoat over his pyjamas. Harry drew back the covers, and Severus lay down next to him. The bed was smaller than Severus's, but they both had more than enough place.

"Well then, I am here with you in your bed. What shall I do with you? I have so many ideas in mind, and I don't know which one to choose," Severus informed him.

"How about a little kiss?" Harry suggested.

"A little one? Why yes, it is prudent to take small steps in the beginning," Severus answered, giving Harry a swift peck on the mouth.

"That was too little!" Harry complained.

"Ahhh. How fastidious we are tonight," Severus observed, kissing Harry and inserting his tongue into the impatient mouth.

"Just like you," Harry quipped breathlessly. Severus's answer was to kiss him again. The atmosphere in the room became charged with high-voltage desire. They were both flushed; Harry boldly unbuttoned Severus's pyjama shirt. Severus did not protest and let him undo the buttons, watching Harry's face closely all the while.

When Harry was done, Severus helped remove his pyjama top, so that they were both lying in bed with bare upper bodies. Harry ran his hand slowly across Severus's chest and stomach. The hand was soon replaced by an eager mouth. Severus, impatient to touch Harry in the same manner, wrapped his arms around his husband and changed their positions. Harry lay underneath him with shining green eyes and one of the happiest smiles he had ever seen. The youth held Severus firmly in place by trapping his body between his thighs and pressing him down with his arms around Severus's neck. Severus gazed down at him and slid his hand between their bodies, and Harry's hips jerked violently as those flitting fingers found his heated hardness.

A week later, they took the next step – removing their clothes in front of each other. Harry was self-confident enough about his body. He used to wish that he were taller and not so skinny; but since he no longer had to return to his relatives, and with Severus keeping a sharp eye on his diet, he was no longer so scrawny. He was content enough with his height, though he would be rather annoyed whenever Severus smugly pointed out to him that Harry often rose on tiptoe when he and Severus were arguing or discussing about something while they were both standing. Severus, on the other hand, was insecure about his body. Some of the men with whom he had had his trysts in the past had unmercifully commented that he should eat more, and one person had asked him what he had done to his nose.

"Genetics is what happened to my nose, you moron," Severus had snarled and hexed the man into a pig.

Severus and Harry took turns to share each other's beds. Severus would spend a week in Harry's bed and Harry would spend the same amount of time in Severus's large four-poster. Harry had not yet broached the subject of simply settling on one bed in case Severus felt rushed. A man who had never known what it was like to be loved or to share intimate spaces might feel restricted, Harry thought; and he did not mind the bed-switching at all; that way, he could receive

Severus in his bed and be received by his husband, always dressed in pyjamas; so when Severus entered Harry's room, the Potions Master was surprised to find Harry wearing only a towel.

"You aren't dressed?" he half stated.

Harry came close to him, his bare feet silent on the floor.

"Try removing it," he murmured to him. Severus raised his eyebrows.

"Go on," Harry encouraged him, toying with the seam of his towel.

"Are you trying to seduce me, Harry Potter?" Severus asked, drawing Harry to him and taking a fold of the towel. He pulled. Nothing happened except that the towel seemed oddly resistant. A mischievous look appeared on Harry's face.

"Ah. A Sticking Charm."

He hooked a finger into the seam, rubbing his knuckle just below Harry's navel. Two shower-moist hands began to unbutton his shirt even as Severus murmured the counter-charm; the towel and shirt fell around their feet simultaneously. Harry's heart was beating very fast. No one had ever seen him like this before – naked and aroused. He reached up and covered the black eyes with his palm.

"Your pants, too. And…underwear." He moved behind Severus, pressing his naked form against the tall wizard's body.

"This is a most elaborate plan of seduction," Severus commented dryly, sliding his pants and underwear down in one move; he stepped out of them and turned.

Harry flushed as he looked at his husband. It was not the first time Severus had been naked with someone, but it was the very first time he was standing like this in front of someone he loved. He was beginning to feel increasingly insecure and self-conscious under his

husband's scrutiny when Harry placed his hand upon his chest, breathing:

"You're perfect."

Severus had heard many assessments about his person and character, but perfect had never been included – rather the contrary. They began to kiss; and, without breaking their kissing, moved to the bed and lay down upon it. Harry embarked on a languid tour of Severus's body with his mouth and hands. Severus shivered at each kiss, lick, nip and touch. He tangled his legs with Harry's, slowly rocking their bodies together. Past and future seemed far away. Voldemort was forgotten, along with House names and values, antagonism and insecurity. Wizarding Hero and Potions Master did not mean anything. Another world seemed to surround them, and it belonged to only them. They were simply Harry and Severus, and they loved each other. Later, Harry looked at the sticky mess on their bodies.

"Sorry," he said, reddening.

"For what?" Severus asked, nonplussed.

"Well, this mess."

"Mess? This is meant to be messy. There is no such thing as neat and tidy sexual explorations."

Harry laughed.

"It's good that it's messy. It's just…no one else has ever seen me like this…until now."

"Yes, it takes getting used to having another pair of eyes see you in complete disarray."

There was a pause during which Severus looked at Harry somewhat cautiously.

"I have to tell you something," he said.

"Tell me," Harry said, playing with his fingers.

"You are aware of the fact that I have had sexual experience before."

"Yes," Harry said calmly.

"I have never been penetrated before. I have always done the penetrating," Severus explained clinically.

Harry's reaction surprised him. The green eyes sparkled.

"Really? That would mean…I'm your first?"

"Yes."

"Wow," he exclaimed, beaming at him. Severus's mouth quirked.

"I am glad that you consider it an honour to attend to my deflowering," he observed. Harry laughed.

"But there's still time for that, isn't there?"

"Yes. There is."

They looked into each other's eyes and knew that there was not much time. It would soon be June. Then July would come. And Harry's birthday. The day on which Severus would have to take him to Voldemort…Severus wrapped his arms around Harry.

"There's something else, Harry."

Harry prompted him with a nod and a squeeze of the hand.

"Would you be willing to go through the bonding ceremony with me once again?" Severus asked.

Chapter 38

CHAPTER 38

A/N: Hope you all had a great Christmas! I did, and I'm still digesting the turkey! A marriage and bonding ceremony are two different processes in this story. Severus is not asking to marry Harry again. Harry is protected by Severus's blood via a magical contract, but Severus refused to accept Harry as his protector, so they performed a one-way bond. However, due to the Ministry's restrictions, only married couples are allowed to have a bonding ceremony and contract. Now, Severus is asking Harry to be his (Severus's) protector (the bond would thus become two-way).

Severus looked anxiously into Harry's eyes, waiting for an answer.

"You mean…are you asking me for my blood protection?" Harry asked slowly.

"I want to be protected by you as you are protected by me," Severus stated.

"Yes, I will undergo a second bonding ceremony with you," Harry whispered, leaning his forehead against Severus's. It was like Severus had proposed to him; and in a way that was what he had done, even though marrying and bonding were two different things but interconnected – especially since the bonding ceremony could only be performed if the participants were married.

"Thank-" Severus started, but Harry interrupted him sternly:

"Don't say it."

Severus smiled; Harry could sound uncannily like the Potions Master himself when he imitated Severus's strict stance.

"When shall we bond?" Harry asked eagerly. Severus summoned a wizarding agenda from his room. It thudded onto the bed between them. Harry grinned. Severus was always meticulous.

"Let's see. In June…" The agenda obligingly moved its own pages until it had reached June.

Severus was silent for a few moments.

"The bond will have to be consummated," he murmured. Harry understood immediately; Severus was thinking of that wretched night again…

"Do I get to top you?" he asked jokingly, trying to prevent Severus from hesitating or brooding – or even changing his mind. It worked; Severus raised an eyebrow.

"You will definitely assume a superior position in bed and have the honour of deflowering me," he said loftily.

"I will 'assume a superior position in bed'? Honestly, Sev! That sounds too funny!" Harry laughed.

"It was meant to tickle your humour," Severus observed with a wry smile. Harry studied the agenda which was flapping its pages impatiently at them.

"Mid-June?" Harry suggested.

"The fifteenth?"

"Yes."

"The fifteenth it is," Severus replied.

Before June started, however, Harry and Severus overcame the major obstacle in their relationship: putting the memory of their consummation behind them. Their physical explorations naturally included little accidents which were bound to happen to any couple.

Thus, Harry knocked over the lamp on his side of the bed with an uncontrolled arm while Severus kissed his delightfully sensitive stomach. It fell down and broke with a loud crash. Another time, Severus's long hair slapped Harry in the eye, and yet another time, they accidentally set the bedclothes on fire because Severus had forgotten to extract his wand from the tangle of sheets; Harry rolled upon it, and a stream of sizzling sparks ignited the sheets, causing the wizards to leap out of bed stark naked, Harry snatching up his own wand and bellowing " *Aguamenti!"*

"See, our love set the sheets on fire," Harry chortled as he admired the soaking bedclothes.

Severus rolled his eyes and did not deign to answer; but he was glad that these little mishaps encouraged rather than discouraged their intimacy.

An equally memorable incident took place when they were writhing around in the sheets and forgot that they were approaching the edge of the bed. There was a warning shout from Severus, a sliding sound, a thud and a moan.

Green eyes blinked down into black ones.

"Sev?"

"I think we'll need to activate a Compass Charm."

"Are you okay?"

"I cannot ascertain any damage."

Harry grinned. Severus's lofty vocabulary in such a situation struck him as most amusing.

However, Severus was especially hesitant to even hint that he wanted to sleep with Harry. His Boggart had changed to a bloodstained lifeless-eyed Harry tangled naked in the sheets – a

horrible sight which made Severus sick to his stomach. He did not tell Harry about this in case he upset the youth. He knew that Harry was tired of the issue and seemed to have dealt with it faster than Severus had. Harry, however, had become adept at sensing when something was bothering his husband. He noticed that Severus shied away from taking their relationship to the next level. He would gaze into Severus's eyes and see the longing written there, the question which dreaded receiving a negative answer, which nearly seemed to expect a turning-away with disgust and repulsion…and he knew what he had to do. If Severus pushed his students, then Severus himself needed a push; and one night, when Harry was in Severus's bed, exchanging passionate kisses and caresses with his husband, he asked:

"Sev, will you make love to me? If you are ready?"

Severus caught his breath. He had had sex with Harry, but that had been under very different and appalling circumstances. He scanned Harry's face, resisting the temptation to use Legilimency in order confirm what he had just heard. He still found it hard to believe that there was someone who loved him.

"Harry, are you absolutely certain that you want this?" he asked finally.

"Yes. Absolutely. And you?"

"Yes."

"Can we face each other? I want to look into your eyes," Harry said.

"Yes, of course we can face each other." Not like last time when we had no eye contact at all, both wizards thought. Severus had discussed "male-male mechanics" and protection with Harry; he was certain that Harry knew all that he had to know in this context. While they prepared for the most intimate contact they had ever indulged in, Severus explained to Harry what he was going to do, managing to soothe and arouse Harry with kisses and caresses at the same time.

He guided Harry into a comfortable position on the bed, with the youth's legs resting upon his shoulders; he wanted to start all over again, as if he had never claimed Harry's body before.

Later, Harry's body and soul were opening up to Severus like a flower unfurling its petals, embracing a thirsty drinker of its nectar. Severus sipped at Harry's well of honey, intoxicated by his unique flavour. They were two dewdrops meeting to become one, nestling up to each other and fusing; and the sunrays shone upon them, turning them iridescent and making them evaporate into another realm of the world, and when it was over, they lay together in a damp hug. They did not speak; the gaze they shared said more than enough. Severus was not the type who said, "I love you" all the time, but Harry had learnt that Severus showed his love in other, more subtle ways. His usually impassive and frequently even sullen face would soften at the sight of his husband; and when Harry smiled, Severus would smile as well.

Severus became a muse for Harry; the youth was sketching and drawing more than ever, and Professor Mukherjee was very pleased, remarking that he had true talent and was developing it further. Harry told her that his husband was one of the sources of his inspiration, and she smiled at the straightforward sweetness of his statement. He asked her whether she would be able to attend his bonding ceremony with Severus, since she had contributed to his drawings; for it had been art which had slowly overcome the barriers between him and Severus. She could unfortunately not attend the event, but she gave Harry an excellent magical self-replenishing watercolour set, and Severus received a fine bottle of his favourite elf-made wine. Albus Dumbledore supplied the couple with bonding robes which had been specially measured and tailored for them; last time, they had had to borrow a set. The only one who was displeased, or did not make the effort to hide any sentiments of displeasure, was Professor Trelawney, who had been predicting that the marriage would end disastrously, involving Harry's death in a boiling cauldron. The rest of the staff had thought that she basically had a point but that it didn't require any Divination skills to come to such a

conclusion. When Severus and Harry proved them completely wrong, Trelawney insisted that the marriage would go wrong anyway – their love would only last temporarily. Her colleagues, who had seen the close connection between Severus and Harry, did not bother to listen to her; Harry and Severus themselves knew better. If there was one thing Severus and McGonagall had in common besides being strict, then it was their intense dislike where Trelawney and her subject were concerned. Firenze, the other Divination teacher, simply said that it was all written in the stars and planets, and that he was not surprised. On being asked about the couple's future, the centaur diplomatically observed that the paths of future in the nocturnal skies were currently illegible.

On the day of the ceremony, Harry smoothed his pearly light-grey robes with a smile. Dobby moved around him excitedly, checking the sleeves. Harry recalled their last bonding. The two weeks which followed. And that humiliating night…

Never again. I once told myself that I would never do this again with Severus. And I won't. Because this time, it will be completely different, he thought. Who would have even imagined that he and Severus would fall in love with each other?

Remus Lupin, Dumbledore, Hermione and Ron would attend the bonding ceremony. Dumbledore had been overjoyed on receiving his invitation.

"Sometimes, my dear bird, I cannot help being a teeny bit proud of my plans," he said to Fawkes. Fawkes uttered a chuckling trill and rubbed his head against Dumbledore's hand. Dumbledore rubbed his hands.

"You had a Burning Day last time…you will be able to enjoy the ceremony today," Dumbledore added, looking around the office; all the furniture had been moved out of the way, and Dumbledore's eyes twinkled when the door opened to admit the first guests: Ron and Hermione, dressed in formal robes.

As was traditional, Severus and Harry had to go separately to the site of the bonding ceremony – Dumbledore's office, like last time. Harry arrived first and Severus a few minutes later. All the guests were already there. Greene, who had presided over the marriage and bonding ceremony last year, was preparing the office for the rituals while Madam Pomfrey bustled about with the bonding needles, checking their sharpness and state of hygiene.

"Congratulations, Severus. I am very happy for you and Harry," Remus Lupin said, and his smile was genuinely warm and affectionate. He had dignity, but he was also very good-natured and reluctant to keep grudges. He held out his hand. Severus took it.

"Thank you, Remus," he said somewhat stiffly. It was the first time he had ever pronounced Remus's name. Harry, in the meantime, was hugging Hermione.

"Oh, Harry, it's simply marvellous!" she nearly squealed.

"Yes, it is," Ron agreed, although he looked a little sceptical. People were talking genially; Fawkes was watching everyone and everything with his intelligent beady eyes; and Dumbledore was discreetly sucking a lemon drop. Then it was time for the ceremony to begin. Severus and Harry removed their shoes and socks, standing barefoot in the room, hands clasped. Harry gave Severus's hand a little squeeze. He recalled how Severus had dug his nails viciously into his palm when they had walked in a circle. Severus's hand was warm and firm in his grip, their fingers intertwined, and the Potions Master returned the squeeze.

Severus listened intently to the bonding words – words which he had dismissed as idealistic sentimental rubbish for foolish people who had been weak enough to succumb to the stupid thing called love. With what hatred and cynicism he had entered this very room a little less than a year ago…

Ron went somewhat green as the needle was inserted into the lovers' wrists; Hermione noticed and gave him a pull-yourself-

together-Ronald-Weasley glare. Harry and Severus seemed oblivious to the fact that people were watching them; they were completely absorbed by each other. When the couple walked around the room in a circle after the bloodletting ritual, Hermione felt her nose and eyes prickle. Even Ron, who had overcome his queasiness triggered by the needles and blood, was looking deeply impressed. Albus Dumbledore and Remus Lupin were beaming. Midway, when Harry and Severus turned their heads and looked each other with glowing smiles, someone sighed with deep emotion. The laws of acoustics located the source of the sigh in Dumbledore's proximity; but most beautiful of all was the moment when Fawkes began to sing; the phoenix opened his beak as soon as Harry and Severus started to walk in a circle. The melody was one of pure of happiness and made everyone present shiver with awe. Severus released Harry's hand and slipped his arm around the youth's waist, drawing him even closer to him. Harry did the same, and that was how they accomplished the rest of the bonding ceremony.

When the ceremony was over, they exchanged a fond embrace and kiss. Dumbledore surreptitiously wiped a tear from the corner of his eye – and he was not the only one. Drinks and snacks were passed around; it was a quiet little celebration. Once everyone was ready to leave, Severus scooped Harry up in his arms and carried him out of Dumbledore's office with cheers and applause in the background.

Chapter 39

CHAPTER 39

A/N: I am aware that the previous chapters and this chapter are quiet and...sappy, as some of you would call it :-) But you are all familiar with the calm before the storm...

Thanks for visiting my Snarry Files blog, by the way:-)

Severus carried Harry all the way down to the dungeons. He shook his head exasperatedly when he saw that Nessa's portrait was again bulging with various subjects from the castle's portraits, and Harry laughed, his arms wrapped around Severus's neck as he was carried into their rooms. Severus set him down gently. Harry reached into his pocket and withdrew a vial containing their bonding blood. He walked over to the shelf where the first bottle was kept. He took Severus's hand in his, and the couple gazed at the two flasks, the symbols of their mutual bond. Their bond was a powerful one, for they were not only linked by a blood contract but also by profound love for each other.

Harry leant his head against Severus's shoulder.

"It will be our anniversary in another eighteen days," he said softly. Severus smiled.

"Yes, and we will celebrate it by having a honeymoon."

Harry had never thought that the word "honeymoon" would sound so sweet coming from Severus's lips. It sounded like one of the words Severus would prefer uttering with disgust and cynicism.

"Really? You want us to have a honeymoon?" he asked, his green eyes sparkling.

"Yes – but it would have to be here at the castle for security reasons. We cannot venture abroad or even beyond the perimeters of this castle with Voldemort and his followers preparing for war and for me to bring you in a supposedly tortured and brainwashed condition."

"We'll not be able to go abroad, then," Harry said wistfully.

"The Dursleys never took you abroad with them?"

"They never bothered to go abroad. They preferred sticking around within the country. I would liked to have gone abroad for our honeymoon, but here is also fine…and with Voldemort around, there's no other choice we've got, just like you said…"

Harry's eyes darkened. He stared at his feet for a moment; then he looked into Severus's black eyes.

"I'm scared, Severus," he said softly. Severus cupped his cheek in one hand.

"Harry, those who are truly brave always admit that they are afraid. But remember that you are protected and have been trained thoroughly. Minerva, Alastor and Kingsley tell me that you have all the qualities of an outstanding Auror."

"I'm scared for my friends…and…for you, Severus."

"You are my Protector," Severus said simply, "and I believe in all which holds us together and has created this bond between us, Harry."

Harry smiled; the clouds of doubt and anxiety moved on, and Severus could see the happiness return, undiluted and genuine. A year ago, Harry and he had loathed each other, Harry accusing him of claiming forcefully and Severus suffering the torture of guilt… And now they had found joy in their marriage. Thanks to both Voldemort and Dumbledore, Severus thought smugly.

"What shall we do on our honeymoon, Sev?"

"Anything that you want – as long as it does not involve those pranks the Weasley twins have developed or anything which might wreck our surroundings," Severus said.

"How about if we start with the preparations…now?" Harry asked breathily – something Severus had come to recognise as Harry's bedroom voice, so to say. A thrill rushed through his body. Harry's mouth approached his own mouth in a delicious kiss. Severus's tongue searched for Harry's. Harry curled up his tongue, playfully evading Severus's explorations; then, with smouldering passion, he uncurled it, launching it at Severus's tongue, making their full-mouthed kiss positively devouring. They kissed some more; their breathing became heavy.

"I want to feel you inside me," Severus panted into Harry's ear.

Harry took his hand; they went into Severus's bedroom, where the young man proceeded to worship Severus's body thoroughly with his lips and hands. He pressed a kiss against the dark-red bonding circle around his husband's left ankle. When they were naked, he took Severus in his mouth, firmly holding the jerking hips onto the mattress with his hands. Severus's breathing became increasingly erratic. He reached down and grasped Harry's waist, pulling against him.

"Take me, Harry. Now," he panted, kissing him hard on the mouth.

Harry, however, was somewhat hesitant about being "on top". Severus, understanding his anxiety, reassured him:

"I know you'll be very careful. I'll tell you if I am uncomfortable."

His tone set Harry at ease, and as soon as he was lost inside Severus's tautness, he forgot that he had been nervous and unsure. Severus's sounds and movements of pleasure took away any lingering doubts. Hands stroked and clutched; mouths whispered

and kissed. Eyes blinked, locked, stared intensely and closed with pleasure.

Afterwards, Severus held Harry against him firmly, enjoying the warm arms around his neck, the tickle of untamed black hair against his chin and the whispered "I love you, Sev."

"And I love you, Harry," he murmured. He had never thought that he would utter those three words one day – or hear them spoken to him by another. Harry's fingers played with the chain around his neck. They lay like calmly in bed for a while until Harry noticed something as he happened to glance at Severus's feet.

"Sev! Look!" Harry exclaimed, pointing at both their left ankles. The circle was fading slowly. The circumstances of the first bonding had made him miss this moment. Severus smiled and kissed his shoulder. The circles were gone within a minute. While Harry still gazed at their feet with awe, Severus disengaged himself from Harry and opened a drawer of his bedside table. He slid back to Harry and put his arm around the youth, pressing something into his hand. Harry looked at it. It was a chain with a delicate square pendant set with a tourmaline. One half of the polished gem was flushed a delicate pink-red, and the other was a bright emerald green.

"It is for you," Severus said, taking the chain from him and putting it around Harry's neck.

"Sev…" Harry flung his arms around Severus. "Thank you so much!"

He kissed Severus and scooped up the pendant in his hand, admiring it.

"It's exquisite."

"I had it designed for you," Severus said, "and it has a charm on it to prevent chipping. You can wear it in the shower, climb mountains with it-"

"Climb mountains?" Harry smiled.

"I am surmising that a shower would be preferable…Or a bath?"

"A bath. That way we can lie in the tub together," Harry said; and when they were reposing in foamy water, Harry dozing with his cheek against Severus's shoulder, Severus wondered at the miracle of being able to find such sweet and beautiful moments in a world where war was about to break loose and a cold cruel hand was reaching out to take his husband away from him; and both he and Harry would do everything prevent it. They definitely needed a honeymoon. Harry would liked to have gone abroad for their honeymoon…They were in a magical castle with magical grounds, and Severus's mouth curved into a smile as an idea occurred to him. True, it wouldn't quite be the same thing, but it would be a good substitute…And he was sure that Albus and Hagrid would help him.

Two and a half weeks later, Severus led Harry across the grounds towards the Forbidden Forest; it was the day of their first wedding anniversary – an occasion which neither wizard would have ever thought of celebrating a year ago. Severus had been woken up in a rather ungentle manner; Harry had flung the sheets off him, smothered him with a hug and several kisses and announced that breakfast was ready. Though not a morning person, Severus had reacted affectionately by returning the embrace and allowing himself to be tugged out of bed.

"Where are we going, Sev?" Harry asked, wrapping his fingers more firmly around Severus's hand.

"You'll see," Severus said unperturbedly, now guiding him down a pebbly path which snaked its way through the trees. "Albus managed to extend the wards a little so that they reach beyond the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and Hagrid has cleared a small area just for our benefit. Albus will reduce the wards after a week, and Hagrid will restore the area to the Forest's inhabitants at the same time."

"Area? A week?"

"For our honeymoon."

"Sev, what exactly-"

"You'll see," Severus repeated, amused at Harry's impatience.

Chapter 40

CHAPTER 40

A/N: Happy New Year and all the best!

"Now close your eyes," Severus instructed his husband, "and don't open them until I tell you to do so."

Harry smiled and closed his eyes. He felt like a child which is about to be pleasantly surprised. It was a wonderful feeling. He could smell the forest – a fresh fragrance with a hint of wood. Pebbles crunched underneath his shoes, and a breeze ruffled his robes and hair. He followed Severus's guidance eagerly but patiently. Now he could hear something familiar – a tinkling of wind chimes.

"You may open your eyes," Severus's voice spoke.

Harry looked around and made a sound of mingled surprise and delight.

He was standing in front of a wooden cottage; it was small and homely, and a set of wind chimes was attached to the ceiling of the front porch. A sturdy brown door was invitingly ajar. Stately trees and lush grass grew around, thriving in the warm July sun, and he forgot that he would be confronting Voldemort at the end of the month.

"Do you like it?" Severus asked.

"Sev, it's beautiful! It's like a fairytale, I think I'm dreaming…"

"I assure you that you are wide awake. Most of the staff helped with the house. Is it to your taste?"

Harry's answer was to throw his arms around Severus's waist and kiss him on the mouth.

"A most enlightening answer," Severus commented, stepping up to the front door and pushing it fully open. The two wizards entered the cottage and removed their shoes. A small staircase led to the single floor above. Everything was spotless and neatly furnished with quaint furniture.

"I was thinking of spending our one-week-honeymoon in here, if this place meets with your approval," Severus said.

Harry gave him another kiss on the lips and smiled at him with shining eyes.

"Sev…I…" he laughed and shook his head. "I'm so happy!"

"I want to make this one of the happiest times for you before…" Severus fell silent; the thought of taking Harry to Voldemort on Harry's birthday pained him deeply.

"Before we go to Voldemort," Harry finished his sentence for him softly. Severus reached into his pocket.

"I took these with us." He held up the two bejewelled bottles containing their bonding blood. "They stand for our union and for Voldemort's downfall, Harry. You, I and the Order of the Phoenix will fight; and Voldemort shall never take you away from me!" His dark eyes flashed and he set the vials down on a shelf. Harry took Severus's hands in his.

"Sev, please promise me something," he said.

"Tell me, Harry," Severus said.

"Promise me that you will live and love again if I should not survive."

"Harry-"

"Sev, promise me that you will search for happiness, no matter what happens."

Severus gazed into the green eyes he had come to love so much.

"Only if you promise me the same thing if I should not survive," Severus said, and his smooth voice was touched with the roughness of sorrow.

"I do," Harry whispered.

"Then so do I," Severus confirmed, embracing his young husband and cursing Voldemort for targeting the person who had managed to bring so much happiness and sunshine into his dismal life.

"And now, lets enjoy our honeymoon-week," Harry suggested.

"Yes, lets do so. Our bedroom is this way," Severus said briskly.

Holding Harry's hand, he went up the stairs and opened the door to a pretty room with floorboards which creaked in a friendly manner. The door of the clothes cupboard was open, and Harry could see some of his and Severus's clothes already hanging neatly from hangers. Severus had truly thought of everything.

"Your friend Dobby has expressed the wish to attend to our needs while we're here," Severus said.

"Dobby's a jewel," Harry said, smiling.

"He certainly is," Severus agreed, remembering that it was thanks to Dobby that his hair was the sleek mane it was now.

The two wizards spent the day strolling about the cottage – naturally keeping within the boundaries of the secluded area. Birds chirped and butterflies fluttered around – it was idyllic. Severus's sarcastic core would have winced mightily at the scenery if Harry had not been with him, and if he hadn't happened to be very much in love. He played wizarding games with Harry in the parlour, and they talked a lot – including about Harry's escapades at Hogwarts.

"There are two things I would like to know," Severus said idly, pushing away a set of cards.

"Fire away," Harry replied, smiling.

"Firstly: what in Merlin's name did you want with Polyjuice Potion in your second year?" he asked sternly.

Harry could not suppress a chuckle; he explained the whole story to Severus.

"That was rather cunning," Severus said dryly, "worthy of a Slytherin."

"Of course. Apart from the fact that the Sorting Hat nearly put me in Slytherin, I am married to the Head of that House," Harry pointed out.

Severus stroked his mouth with his tapering index finger.

"Secondly: what about that Gillyweed in your fourth year?"

Harry answered the question a little hesitantly since it was Dobby who had taken the Gillyweed; but Severus merely smiled.

"A true friend indeed to venture near my private stores," he murmured, actually appreciating the humour of the situation – something which he would never have done even a few months ago.

"Are you, er, annoyed?" Harry asked cautiously.

"It is rather long ago, isn't it?" Severus reminded him.

"Well, yes, but you tend to remember past events which happened ages ago in minute detail," Harry observed delicately.

Severus shot him a keen glance.

"In other words: I tend to keep grudges," he confirmed.

"No longer that much – not since you discovered that married life benefits you," Harry said cheekily.

Severus raised a sardonic eyebrow; Harry laughed.

At night, after an excellent supper prepared by an enthusiastic Dobby, Harry decided to try out seduction tactics on Severus, who was reading in bed, dressed only in a pair of pyjama bottoms – the summer nights were hot. He strolled out of the adjoining bathroom in a pair of black cotton briefs. He joined Severus in bed, making sure to nudge Severus's thigh with his own. Severus did not react; instead, he turned the page and continued reading. Harry casually brushed a patch of skin just above the seam of Severus's pants with his knuckles – a particularly sensitive spot. Severus ignored him, but Harry saw the hairs stand up on his arms – a sign of Severus's distraction. Harry boldly drew circles around Severus's navel with his finger. Seeing Severus's eyes spark with passion and abandon the fine print, he bent over Severus's stomach and blew a stream of cool air into his navel. Severus finally tossed the book aside and imprisoned Harry in his arms, trying to kiss him; but Harry avoided the kiss, averting his face mischievously. Severus changed his position, attempting to steal a kiss from him; Harry laughed softly and ducked his head. Severus gently rolled Harry over onto his back and slid on top of him, determined to claim Harry's evasive lips. Harry cupped Severus's face in his hands, and when their lips were almost locked in a kiss, he turned his head to the side.

"Harry Potter," Severus growled, "first you tease me and then you play the prude!"

Harry merely smirked. Severus lunged in for another attack, and this time, he was successful. Their kiss was burning and hungry. Harry's tongue collided with Severus's. When they drew back, the young man observed breathlessly:

"That was a slip of the tongue."

"You were definitely trying to give me the slip," Severus answered languidly, tasting Harry's mouth again. He felt two hands tug at his pyjama pants. He broke their oral tryst in order to peel them down his legs, Harry helping him assiduously as he did so. They were naked and making sweet love within ten minutes, moaning, sweating and writhing on the bed.

"What a honeymoan," Harry panted afterwards.

Severus snorted derisively at the pun but smiled into Harry's sweaty hair.

Harry woke up in the morning feeling relaxed, happy and warm. The sun was poking in through the shutters and curtains, and he saw Severus's profile in the soft glow. He carefully extricated himself from Severus's arms and slipped out of bed. Severus shifted and changed his position. Harry pulled on his underwear and went to the bathroom. He padded his way silently into the bedroom after twenty minutes, running his hand through his moist hair. Severus was sleeping soundly, an arm thrown above his head, the sheets reaching till just below his navel. A blush rose to Harry's cheeks as he recalled their passionate lovemaking. He summoned a piece of charcoal and a sheet of drawing paper, settled down on a chair and began to sketch, his right hand moving deftly. Severus's arm resting near his head, the long black hair, the striking strong-willed face with its ever arrogant cheekbones, the slope of his neck and chest, the dusky nipples, his stomach, the lean torso, the enticing trail of body hair, the wedding band on his finger…Harry narrowed his eyes and began to fine-tune the shading. A shadow travelling along Severus's arm…emphasising the sleek texture of his hair…and the sheets needed more wrinkles as they lapped around his abdomen…defining the navel more clearly…Harry smiled. Drawing Severus was like making love to him in a different way, caressing the lines of his body tenderly with a pencil. Harry was pleased with the sketch of his sleeping husband. He looks so sensual even when he's not awake, he mused. He wrote the date and his initials in a corner of the sketch and abandoned his chair. He snuggled up to Severus in bed and

dozed happily until Severus stirred, waking up, revealing an enjoyable view of his back to Harry as he leant out of the bed to drink some water. Then he put his arms around Harry, kissing his hair. Harry turned a little and looked into his husband's black eyes.

They enjoyed their honeymoon thoroughly and were rather downhearted when it was time to leave the cottage and return to the castle. To the harshness of the real world. To the fact that Voldemort was waiting for Harry. Harry turned his head to look at the cottage one last time before it was razed to the ground by magic. Severus saw the sad expression on his face.

"Come, Harry," he said gently. He himself was feeling cynical. It was so typical of life to threaten happiness with obstacles of the worst kind. The final confrontation was due in only three weeks. Harry slipped his fingers into Severus's hand. It was a gesture full of faith and reassurance. Severus held Harry's hand firmly, and the couple walked back to the castle.

"It was a fantastic honeymoon, Sev," Harry said softly after a while.

"It was…quite passable," Severus commented, using one of his favourite expressions. He had started using it more often ever since he had noticed that it made Harry laugh. And sure enough, Harry started to laugh. They had reached the castle by now. Three weeks of hard training and rehearsals of plans with the Order of the Phoenix awaited them. Harry brushed the pocket of his robes with his free hand. The sketch of Severus lying in bed was safely tucked away in it, anchoring a beautiful honeymoon memory.

Chapter 41

CHAPTER 41

A/N: There will be a fourth Snarry story, and I am thinking of a blind Harry. Please submit your votes in the poll and/or your comments in the comments section on my blog (cf. homepage on my profile page) if you're interested in participating in the fourth Snarry story plot:-) You will also find more information on a prospective blind Harry plot on my blog. Thank you for all your reviews, and thanks for visiting my blog, too!

Severus stared at Harry's sketch on the wall. Only three days were remaining until Harry's birthday. Please let it not be the day of Harry's doom, he silently begged the invisible and fickle power called Fate. He felt a moan of pain come out of him – pain eating up his soul. He loathed Voldemort so much that he wanted to throw up. He had discovered joy with Harry – and, all the more incredible, Harry had discovered joy with him, snide Severus Snape. A touch from Harry was enough to calm him down when he was grumbling about grading or exploded potions and other annoying things. That was all it needed – Harry approaching him and touching his hand. Harry smiling and laughing, launching Severus's own sarcastic comments back at him with exquisitely chosen timing. He recalled their honeymoon in the charming cottage with yearning. Please don't take him away from me, Severus plunged into his voiceless mantra again. Please don't…

Two arms wrapped around his waist.

"Sev," Harry said softly. Severus turned around and looked at him. Harry was so tranquil – too tranquil, even.

"Harry…it is…" Severus stopped and shook his head slowly. "It is the ghastliest birthday celebration…" he broke off. "Why don't you want

to celebrate the day before?"

Harry kissed his cheek.

"I don't believe in celebrating a birthday in advance – unless you're born on the 29th February, of course. I'm a bit superstitious about early birthday celebrations. Our honeymoon was the sweetest celebration I could think of, Sev. Not in terms of a birthday feast. In terms of celebrating you and me and what we have together. There's nothing more that I could wish for. Well, except for destroying Voldemort and keeping those I love safe."

Severus pressed Harry against him.

"We will destroy him," he said through gritted teeth; then, hearing a knock on the door, he released Harry and went to the door. He opened it, and all of Harry's friends and Order members poured inside: the Weasleys (except for the twins, Percy, Bill and Charlie), Lupin, Tonks, Mukherjee the art teacher, and, beaming at him, Ron and Hermione. Luna Lovegood looked as serene as usual. Harry blinked; then he looked at his husband and understood that Severus wanted him to feel like he was meeting his family and extended family. As soon as people had finished hugging and greeting him, he fairly sprinted to Severus and kissed him in front of everyone.

"Thank you, Sev."

"These quarters have definitely never, ah, hosted such an appalling invasion before," Severus's characteristic sarcasm washed over him. Harry simply grinned at him and, seizing his hand, tugged him over to the group of people waiting for them. Severus did not protest, although his facial expression was forbiddingly dour. Ron and Hermione had been recently made Order members, and they would be part of the people who, under the guidance of Alastor Moody and McGonagall, would attack the Death Eater camps which had been built in the bowels of wizarding London– places where Voldemort was brainwashing and recruiting young people into Death Eaters, including Draco Malfoy. Another group, led by Lupin and Hagrid,

would go into the Forbidden Forest to prevent the gathering of Dementors, werewolves supporting Voldemort and other creatures. A final group supervised by Mukherjee and Flitwick would attempt to break into Malfoy Manor, where Harry and Severus would meet Voldemort and his Death Eaters. It was therefore inevitable that the familial atmosphere in the dungeons was somewhat troubled with anxiety and that some tactics and plans were touched upon again during conversation. Harry was nevertheless happy to be surrounded by people he trusted and was close to. Both Ron and Hermione fought bravely against their tears as they embraced Harry on their way out; they were the last to leave.

"You'll do it, mate," Ron said gruffly, ruffling Harry's hair affectionately.

"We'll all do it, Harry," Hermione said in a fierce voice, kissing his cheek. They shook Severus's hand, and Hermione gave him a smile which thanked him for making Harry happy. The smile also seemed to say, I told you so!

When the last night came, Severus and Harry made love with a heartbreaking desperation, knowing that when the night was over then they would have breakfast and wait for Voldemort's summons while Dumbledore and the rest of the Order prepared their plans. When Severus collapsed on top of Harry after their lovemaking, he clung to the youth, and tears scalded his thin cheeks. Those tears were the only sign of his grief; he suppressed his weeping and the urge to yield to the shakes which were threatening to overwhelm his body and make him tremble all over; but Harry knew, and he didn't have to feel the tears wetting his shoulder to realise that Severus was struggling with all his might to smother his weeping. In spite of their thorough preparation, they had no guarantee who would win and who would lose. They could only hope, and it was with hope in his heart that Harry put his arms around Severus and stroked the Potions Master's head with a tenderness which made Severus want to weep aloud. The slight fingers slid slowly through his long hair, and the cool metal of Harry's wedding band touched his scalp.

"Sev, do you remember our honeymoon cottage?" Harry murmured to him.

"How could I not?" Severus said with admirable steadiness. He did not even sound stuffy-nosed.

"It's a memory no one can take from us, Sev."

"Not even a Dementor, my love."

"Not even a Dementor," Harry agreed, green eyes filling with tears which spilt into Severus's hair. Neither of them slept much. They kept on waking up and reaching out for each other, searching instinctively for the reassuring warmth of the other. Dawn arrived far too soon, and it was with a horrible feeling that Harry and Severus got up on the 31st July. It was Harry's birthday, and it was the day Harry would have to confront Voldemort again. They knew that it was inevitable. Everyone knew. And it didn't make things any easier. People were expecting Harry to get rid of Voldemort for once and for all. No one wanted to think of what would happen if Harry failed.

The couple met with Dumbledore in his study after a silent breakfast which they had forced themselves to swallow. They needed as much strength as possible. Nessa the snake had hissed parting words of encouragement to Harry.

The wise Headmaster of Hogwarts studied the two wizards with grave eyes. His gaze did not fail to notice their tightly clasped hands and pale determined faces.

"Your love, Harry and Severus, makes your mutual bond very powerful indeed. If Voldemort were to touch either of you, then he would suffer horrible pain, and it is well possible that the Death Eaters will not be able to touch you either," Dumbledore said at last, approaching them and placing one hand on Harry's shoulder and the other on Severus's. They had planned and planned until they thought their heads would burst. Voldemort could not touch Harry and Severus, but he could still harm them with spells and curses.

"Harry, my dear boy, it is your nineteenth birthday today. This day is yours, not Voldemort's. Make sure that Voldemort is aware of it."

"I will, Professor," Harry said.

"Severus, today is the moment when Voldemort will learn about your true alliance. He will regard you as a traitor, and he will also learn that it is your loyalty which will be his downfall. There is so much more I would like to say to you both…but I can only say this: Severus and Harry, you embody the power Voldemort knows not."

Harry turned to look at Severus and smiled. Severus did not smile back, but he gave his husband a deep look which spoke volumes; and even as he did so, the Black Mark started to burn, and his face went blank.

"It is time, Albus," Severus said matter-of-factly.

Dumbledore nodded slowly.

"Good luck, my dear boys. Take care, and remember that I am very proud of you."

Fawkes let out a loud trill and flew around them in a circle, as if blessing them. Dumbledore summoned a purple travelling cloak.

"Time to collect the Order members," he said. He embraced Harry and Severus warmly, and Fawkes sat on the table in front of him, flicking his long tail feathers at him. Dumbledore gripped them. There was a flash; a phoenix feather drifted onto the table; wizard and bird were gone. Harry picked up the feather reverently and left the office and the castle with Severus, walking hurriedly towards the edge of the grounds. Harry could Apparate and had his Apparating licence; but he could not Apparate to Malfoy Manor without the Dark Mark, and therefore needed to go with someone who possessed said mark. Severus put his arms around Harry, using the act of Apparating as a means of sharing a final and private moment of

closeness with Harry, and pressed his lips against the youth's forehead; then they were sucked away into a funnel of confusion.

Chapter 42

CHAPTER 42

Harry and Severus landed in the middle of a large and elegantly furnished hall in Malfoy Manor. Severus, who was perfectly used to Apparating, landed gracefully and lightly on his feet; Harry stumbled slightly, and Severus supported him, still retaining him in his arms. Harry gazed briefly into Severus's black eyes. Severus was wearing his Death Eater outfit – cloak, hood and mask; yet nothing could hide the emotion in his eyes, or the warmth of his body as he held Harry.

"Oh! Look who's here! Baby Potter and his doting spouse!" Bellatrix's sneering voice greeted Harry and Severus.

"Silence. It is I who speaks first," Voldemort said coldly. Harry stood calmly next to Severus, who had released him from his embrace in the meantime. He could feel the tourmaline pendant caress his collarbone.

"Harry Potter," Voldemort said mockingly, spreading out his arms in a mock embrace of welcome. His snake Nagini was lying comfortably across his shoulders.

"Such a joyful occasion. Happy birthday, my sweet boy. Tell me, how does married life suit you?"

The circle of Death Eaters around them snickered appreciatively. Harry thought he recognised the figure and blue eyes of Lucius Malfoy, who had been cold-blooded enough to send his own son to a Death Eater camp.

"It suits me just fine, my Lord," Harry replied tonelessly. Voldemort approached Harry, staring into his eyes; then he slowly circled the youth and the Potions Master.

"I am impressed, Severus. My faithful servants will be delighted to give him some further…training."

He turned to Severus.

"Tell me, Severus, does the boy still protest in bed?"

Peter Pettigrew uttered a squeaky laugh.

Voldemort turned.

"Amusing, isn't it, my little Wormtail?" he said casually. Pettigrew immediately muttered an apology, bowing and grovelling.

"Well, Severus?"

"My husband has not the remotest reason to protest in bed or in any other location, my Lord," Severus answered suavely.

"Excellent, excellent!" Voldemort patronisingly patted Severus's shoulder with a thin white hand. "That fool Dumbledore has left Hogwarts?"

"Yes, my Lord, and he has entrusted me with the well-being of the castle. He is currently searching for your whereabouts in the Albanian forests with a group of deplorably incompetent witches and wizards."

Voldemort began to laugh.

"Ah, Severus, how well you have won that old fool's trust…and this dull-witted little boy's devotion."

He shot Harry a triumphant look and stretched out a skeletal white finger, moving Harry's fringe out of the way and exposing the scar, which was burning and aching heavily because of Voldemort's direct presence. Harry did not show the slightest sign of pain. Voldemort caressed the scar, and Harry bit back a scream.

"Now you are mine, Potter. Mine to do with what I want. My precious little toy." His voice became a sickening taunting coo.

Harry guessed that all kinds of dark creatures and many Death Eaters from the recruitment camps were moving towards Hogwarts in the belief that Dumbledore had abandoned it for the Albanian Forests – simply because Voldemort was relying on the word of Severus Snape. Dumbledore, however, was at Hogwarts to protect the school against the invasions of the Voldemort's forces; Harry was infinitely grateful that the students were home and simultaneously worried about those who had remained at Hogwarts. The wards protecting Hogwarts were extremely powerful, but they would withstand the attacks of Dark Magic only for a certain amount of time…

Voldemort spread out his arms regally, his black robes spreading about him like a thundercloud. Nagini hissed softly.

"My dear Death Eaters, and my dear guest," he said, gesturing derisively at Harry, "the time we have all been waiting for has come today. We shall purge this world of unworthy wizards and witches whose blood is soiled with the muggle impurities and whose minds are warped by convictions such as those followed by that dupe Dumbledore. It shall be my pleasure to take the oh so great Dumbledore captive on his way back from Albania and have some sport with his protégé here. I am sure my dearest Bellatrix and my slippery Lucius will enjoy assisting me in this task. And you, Severus, as his husband, shall have the unique honour of demonstrating the… highlights of your marital life."

Severus bowed his head.

"I am humbled by having such an honour conferred upon me, my Lord," he said, his voice sleek and low.

"My dear Harry Potter," Voldemort resumed, "you must know that I believe in power, purity and punishment. What do you believe in, my precious little toy?"

"I believe in love, my Lord," Harry said clearly. Severus did not move or speak, but his eyes gleamed through the hole in the mask. The time had indeed come. Bellatrix tittered, staring at Harry disdainfully. Malfoy's lip curled.

"Love? How touching, my toy! Severus's definition of love must be interesting indeed! Why, how can it possibly be defined when it is too puny and stupid to even exist?"

Some of the Death Eaters started to laugh.

Severus took Harry's hand in his.

"No love, my Lord?" Severus asked softly, nearly casually. Harry recognised that uncanny silky note in his husband's voice. Modulating his voice was one of Severus's strongest weapons; his whisper was just as ominous, if not more so, than his shouting. Voldemort's red eyes narrowed. Severus and Voldemort stared at each other, and Harry knew that Voldemort was using Legilimency on Severus. He shivered inwardly, marvelling at how steadily Severus's black eyes held Voldemort's gaze. Voldemort's red eyes widened. They darted from Severus to Harry, and back again.

"He is your toy! A plaything!" he hissed. "You showed me scenes of enjoying his body! He is ready to be recruited as my most faithful servant!"

"Harry is my love," Severus said quietly, drawing Harry close to his side. Harry pressed against him, his green eyes staring defiantly at Voldemort.

"You brainwashed him into developing an infatuation with you, did you not, Severus?" Voldemort asked, refusing to accept the truth Severus had revealed to him in tiny glimpses via the mental communication.

"Severus never brainwashed me, Tom Riddle. It is so ironic that it was you who brought us together. You actually deserve credit for the

love between us," Harry said clearly. The Death Eaters had stiffened.

"I told you, my Lord! I told you that he was not to be trusted!" Bellatrix screamed.

"Silence!" Voldemort barked. His eyes seem to devour Severus with hatred.

"You treacherous piece of filth," he exclaimed in a hiss.

"Do not call my husband names, Tom," Harry said icily.

"Seize them!" Voldemort commanded. The Death Eaters moved forwards. No sooner had they laid hands on Severus and Harry when they recoiled, cursing, pressing their hands against their chests as if they had been burnt.

"Blood protection," Voldemort whispered, and Harry saw a spark of fear in his red eyes.

"A bonding ceremony, Tom. You have the distressing tendency to forget about blood magic, don't you?" Harry remarked. Voldemort drew out his wand with a snarl; Nagini slid off his shoulders; the other Death Eaters pulled out their wands and moved towards Severus, intending to fight against him in a group.

There was no time for Harry and Severus to exchange words or gazes; but they squeezed each other's hands swiftly and let go, preparing for a fierce combat. Harry heard Severus mutter something, and realised that he had deactivated the wards which prevented others from Apparating in Malfoy Manor. Voldemort's eyes blazed.

"I will fling both your corpses to the Inferi!" he declared. Harry did not reply; he held Voldemort's scorching gaze. Voldemort hissed " *Attack!* " to Nagini, and the enormous snake crawled swiftly towards Harry, opening her mouth and displaying her fangs; then a group of familiar witches and wizards rushed into the room; the Order

members had entered Malfoy Manor. The duels began; furniture, pictures, mirrors and other furnishings were blasted apart or used as obstacles to impede the path of a curse; insults and shouts echoed about the room, and the air was heavy with smoke and wrath. Severus was fighting against Bellatrix, and Harry was duelling Lucius Malfoy.

"What does it feel like to send your own son to a Death Eater camp?" Harry shouted, dogging a hex.

"What do you know about my noble son, you filthy half-blood?"

"Save that term for your Lord Tom, Malfoy. Draco managed to send an owl to Hogwarts, it arrived last week."

"My son! A traitor!" Malfoy choked out.

"His father! A traitor!" Harry shouted back at him.

"Your husband is the worst traitor of all!" Lucius stated. " *Cru-* "

A Stunning Spell from Harry's wand caught him in the stomach.

"That's what you get for insulting my husband, you bastard!" Harry muttered, taking care to step heavily on Malfoy's leg as he tried to locate Severus. He found him; and even as he did, he witnessed Bellatrix fling her wand aside with a childish scream of rage and fly at Severus with her nails.

"TRAITOR!" she bellowed.

"Still in love with the Dark Lord after all these years, Bella? Does your husband know?" Severus said tauntingly, imprisoning one of her clawing hands in his grip while he held her away from his body with his free arm. Harry wanted to call his name, but Voldemort suddenly appeared in his way. His pet Nagini, a formidable enemy because of her speed and her ability to leap in the air and spray her opponent with dangerous venom, was smashed onto the floor by a

skilful spell from Mukherjee's wand. The witch did not pause; she drew out a silver dagger and pinned Nagini to the ground by driving it cleanly through her neck.

Voldemort yielded to a shriek of fury and rounded on Mukherjee. He aimed the Cruciatus Curse at her, but she evaded the spell by stepping swiftly out of its path. Harry lost sight of her; he desperately hoped that Severus was not hurt. And all the others…his friends… Dumbledore…Voldemort loomed up behind a Death Eater and seized him by his long hair.

"Give me your wand before I break your neck," he spat.

"Did you remember only now that your wand and mine share the same core, Tom?" Harry asked.

Voldemort closed in on him, clutching the Death Eater's wand in his hand.

"Where is Dumbledore? Not here to protect his darling?"

Harry stared into Voldemort's eyes and understood why only he could defeat the cruel wizard. It had to end the way it had started…

"Harry!"

Severus's voice was in his ear, and the tall wizard was standing next to him, bleeding from his nose and from scratches on his throat.

"Sev! No!"

A hex caught Severus in the back; the Potions Master gasped with pain and fell down on one knee.

Voldemort's eyes gleamed; he had spotted a vulnerable chink in Harry's defences: Severus Snape. Voldemort snatched his own wand out of his robes. Harry paled.

" *AVADA KEDAVRA* !" Voldemort bellowed.

"NO!" Harry screamed as the green flash darted towards Severus… Stunned, Severus saw the green flash catch Harry in the chest as the youth sought to protect Severus in the only way he knew; and at the same time, he experienced a powerful shock which hit his whole body; he fell down on both knees; and even as he watched, the green flash rebounded from Harry to Voldemort. The red eyes did not have time to even widen before the curse struck Voldemort in the chest, like it had done with Harry. Tom Marvolo Riddle keeled over and lay on the floor, never to rise again. Severus stared at the corpse for a moment; with a grunt of pain, he struggled to his feet, his back aching, and rushed over to the inert body of his husband. The last duels around him had suddenly stopped; everyone and everything was silent. A fit of trembling seized Severus when he saw Harry lying as still on the floor as Voldemort. His eyes were closed, and the dark lashes did not flutter.

"Harry," Severus whispered.

With shaking hands which had been steady for years, he frantically rolled down the collar of Harry's cloak, exposing his neck. He felt for the pulse, for the hint of a heartbeat…and found nothing. He held his ear against Harry's lips and nostrils, hoping to hear him breathe…in vain. He conjured a mirror and held it to Harry's face, hoping for a mist to cover the glass…but the mirror remained perfectly clear.

Severus uttered a cry which reflected all the pain and despair every war burdened the world with. He cradled Harry in his arms, stroking his face with his hands: "Harry…Tourmaline…Beautiful Eyes… Please look at me…Please! Please don't go…Open your eyes… Look at me…"

But there was no response from Harry.

Severus raised Harry's body in his arms, his face deathly pale.

"Harry, look at me, please do!"

The eyelids remained shut.

Severus yielded to another scream of mingled rage and sorrow. All the self-control which had built up over the years evaporated in his scream. He scooped up his lifeless husband in his arms and rocked back and forth in his grief, whispering Harry's name repeatedly. The remaining Death Eaters and Order members were too stunned to move. A hand pressed his shoulder. Severus looked up into the stricken blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore.

Chapter 43

CHAPTER 43

Dumbledore stared down at Harry.

"I have come too late," he whispered. The Headmaster's long beard was singed and he was holding his right arm stiffly. He looked old, tired and not at all triumphant about Voldemort's death. The blue eyes glanced at Voldemort's corpse for a moment and back at Harry.

Severus did not want to let go of Harry. He pressed a kiss to Harry's yet warm forehead. He felt another jolt rush through his body, similar to the one which had brought him to his knees. The disbelief about what had happened was deep, all right.

"He is still warm, he is still warm…" he murmured, his voice and eyes dull with shock. He didn't notice Aurors rounding up the remaining Death Eaters, or people attending to the injured and wounded. Some people had fallen in battle, and not all of them were Death Eaters. Dumbledore knelt down next to Severus and stretched out his hand to touch Harry's cheek.

"DON'T TOUCH HIM!" Severus bellowed. "LOOK AT HIM! LOOK WHAT YOU HAVE DONE TO HIM!"

"Severus, he was the only who could kill Voldemort…"

"At what a price, Albus. At what a price! Look at him!" Severus's face was contorted with sorrow, and the tears ran freely down his thin face. He remembered what he had promised Harry. It was impossible to keep that promise. How could he ever find happiness again?

"I am carrying him home," Severus said softly, ignoring Dumbledore's mild rejoinder. He grimaced as he stood up slowly,

lifting Harry up in his arms. He glared daggers at a Mediwitch who approached him.

"Go away! Leave me alone!" he snapped at her.

"Severus, you are injured-" Dumbledore started, but he was interrupted by Severus's glacial tone.

"No one will take my husband from me or touch me until I have taken him home to Hogwarts, Albus."

Dumbledore nodded slowly and handed him a Portkey.

"You do not have enough strength to Apparate; at least use this, however much you may blame me for what happened."

Severus took the Portkey, and he was on the Hogwarts grounds within seconds. People were hurrying up and down over the lawns; traces of a fierce battle were in evidence at Hogwarts as well. No one paid attention to him; everyone was too busy and distressed. Severus walked up to the castle, his tall thin figure bowed with grief and the weight of the body he was carrying. He had stopped weeping. His face was rigid as stone. He sank down on his knees as his back protested vehemently; he bent over Harry in pain, and his cheek brushed Harry's as he did so. He did not pull away; instead he remained in that position for a few seconds, closing his eyes as he felt Harry's firm cheek against his own. The tiniest breeze seemed to flutter against his ear. Severus's eyes snapped open, and he stared at Harry's face. Had it only been a breeze? Or wishful thinking? A figment of his desperate imagination? He pulled out the mirror and held it against Harry's nose and mouth. A faint mist covered the glass. Severus stared. With trembling hands, he snatched up Harry's wrist and searched for the pulse. Was that a heartbeat? He wasn't sure. It seemed so faint…Maybe it was his mind after all, stunned with grief and playing tricks on him…But the mirror…? He recalled the two jolts which he had ascribed to shock. What if they were connected with Harry? Things began to click in Severus's tired brain. The first jolt…Harry's heart standing still. And the second one…

Harry's heart beating again. About two minutes between the shocks. The human brain could be damaged after three minutes without oxygen, perhaps even earlier…Severus staggered to his feet; his knee and side were burning like fire. Just then, his name was called, and he saw Hagrid running towards him.

"Hagrid, take him…take him…as fast as possible…hospital wing…" Severus gasped. Hagrid immediately took Harry from him. His eyes were full of questions, but he knew that there was no time to utter them.

"Professor Snape!" Ron and Hermione came running towards him. Hermione's cheek was scratched and bleeding, and the seam of her robes was ripped; otherwise she seemed undamaged. Ron's hair was singed, and there was a scorch mark on the arm of his robes. Severus swayed; Hermione and Ron immediately supported him on either side and followed Hagrid to the hospital wing. Most of the beds were already full, and nearly everyone was nursing injuries. There were deaths, too. Four Aurors had been killed – including Alastor Moody. Others had been Portkeyed directly to St. Mungo's.

In the hospital wing, Severus was received by a grim-faced Poppy Pomfrey. She was bending over Harry. Severus opened his mouth, but the witch was faster.

"He is alive, Severus – just barely. His condition is critical. We might have to send him to St. Mungo's-"

"Please do all you can to save him," Severus said, clutching at a table. Ron and Hermione had darted towards Harry's bed with exclamations, but they were warded off by a wizard; additional Medi-wizarding staff had just come inside the room; Madam Pomfrey could not possibly handle so many patients on her own. Ron and Hermione were led away to have their own injuries attended to. Remus Lupin and Tonks were sitting close together on one bed; Tonks was sobbing into her hands. Her parents had been killed by Death Eaters. Remus was holding her against his chest, on the

verge of tears himself. Severus had been forced to lie down on a bed while he protested and twisted his body in order to see Harry.

"Stop being so uncooperative!" Pomfrey ordered, "or your back is going to be mightily unhappy."

"I don't care about my back – Harry-"

A potion was thrust into his hand.

"Drink that. I don't need to tell you what it is, obviously, since you brewed it yourself."

He obeyed with a glare, and the pain was numbed within a minute.

Dumbledore swept into the ward.

"Where are Severus and Harry?" he asked.

Pomfrey hurried towards him and led him to the two beds, repeating that Harry was only just alive.

"Poppy, please put the beds together," Dumbledore said when he saw Severus staring at Harry's bed.

Madam Pomfrey obeyed without delay. Severus stretched out his hand and touched his husband's fingers.

Dumbledore's eyes glistened with tears at the sight of the unspoken love Severus felt for Harry. He himself had always been hopeful that the two would be able to overcome their resentment, but the love which had blossomed between them had been a beautiful surprise even for him. Something stirred in his pocket; Dumbledore took out a wrinkled baby Fawkes with great tenderness, cradling him in his hand before carefully setting him down on a table. The faithful bird had saved his life yet again by swallowing a Killing Curse aimed at him.

"I need to check him again, his heartbeat has to be monitored," Pomfrey rapped out. Severus shut his eyes, completely worn out.

"His heart stood still for about a hundred seconds," Madam Pomfrey announced to Dumbledore, standing protectively in front of Harry.

"Less than two minutes without oxygen," Severus stated, shaking off his tiredness and opening his eyes again. He sat up and twisted his hands.

"Any amount of time without oxygen is critical, but it is near three minutes that the first damages to the brain occur. Harry should be fine…as fine as he can be in his present condition. I have found something singular, however." She stepped aside and gestured at Harry's exposed chest – she had undone his robes to check his heart. Severus uttered a soft exclamation, and Dumbledore blinked. The rebounding curse had left another scar on Harry's chest; but this one was in the shape of a bird of prey – a falcon.

Severus looked up at Dumbledore.

"It's Harry's Patronus," he breathed.

"The symbol of protection. The symbol of his love for his husband and Protector – for you, Severus."

"The blood bond…"

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "It prevented him from fully relinquishing his life. He is currently in a coma, wandering between life and death."

Dumbledore slowly sat down on a chair.

"You see, Severus, it had to end the way it started. Lily sacrificed herself to protect Harry – and the curse rebounded…"

"…and Harry sacrificed himself to save me…"

"Yes. That was the power which destroyed Voldemort for once and for all, Severus. Harry's love for you. But there is something else. Voldemort included Harry's blood in the potion which resurrected him in Harry's fourth year. He carried a part of Harry within himself, a drop of innocence and love. Aiming the curse at Harry was aiming it at himself. Voldemort has always considered forms of magic attached to love and emotions as inferior and negligible. Harry's blood and the blood-bond between you and Harry, Severus, were too much for him."

"And what if it was too much for my husband as well?" Severus asked coldly.

"Severus, only you can bring him back."

"Bring him back? From where?"

"You will need Legilimency, determination, your love for Harry and an hour's time."

"What-?"

"Severus, listen to me. This is no ordinary coma. Harry is dying slowly. You need to establish a mind bond with him and try to bring him back with you."

"Are you telling me that he is in some kind of…wizarding underworld?" Severus said with a sneer.

"So to say, Severus. Your blood bond contract is still valid because Harry is yet alive, and it is because of your bond-" he gestured at the falcon-scar on Harry's chest, "that his heart started to beat again. But the Killing Curse is still trying to make Harry succumb to it. Severus, my dear boy, I know how tired you are-"

"-and I will do everything I can to bring Harry back. I want to…" his voice broke for a moment, then he regained his control. "If I fail, then

he will be free, even if I am to live without him. Now he is imprisoned. If I can't take him back with me, then he shall go on to his next life."

"Yes, he will go on, Severus, and maybe you will meet again in the next life…"

"But I want him with me in *this* life," Severus growled.

"You have an hour, Severus, before the curse saps his life force completely. You know the ritual."

"I need the two vials containing our bonding blood – I cannot establish eye contact with Harry…" Severus said.

"Dobby!" Dumbledore called. The house elf appeared, his arm in a sling – the house elves, too, had joined the battle against foul creatures which had issued forth from the Forbidden Forest.

"Please fetch the two bonding vials in Professor Snape's quarters as fast as you can."

The elf was back within thirty seconds; Severus took Harry's wand which had been placed on the bedside table and lay down next to his husband, gazing upon the beloved face for a few seconds. He draped his arm around Harry's waist, his face close to the young wizard's.

"I am ready to begin," he announced. He muttered a charm to unseal the bottles, tapping them with his wand, and pulled out their stoppers. Dumbledore wordlessly held out a small porcelain bowl; Severus poured a few drops out of both bottles and resealed them; Dumbledore received them back, holding them reverently. Severus dipped the tips of his and Harry's wands into the scarlet-gold mixture and placed the wands above their heads, tip to tip, with only a small distance separating them. Dumbledore extended his own wand, and, chanting musically, cast an ancient binding spell on the wands. The wands began to hum; their tips glowed, and a fiery red thread connected their tips. Dumbledore withdrew; Severus closed his eyes

and pushed his fatigue aside, concentrating on the power of the Legilimency spell. The hum and glow from the wands became faint as he sought a way to access the depths of Harry's mind.

Chapter 44

CHAPTER 44

Severus found himself in what seemed to be complete darkness. He automatically reached for his wand – but it wasn't there. Puzzled, he rummaged around in his robes. He came to the conclusion that he would have to rely on wandless magic if it came to the clinch. A faint voice seemed to whisper his name. Severus looked around, narrowing his eyes in the dark, and became aware of thin veils of greyish fog drifting lazily towards him. They melted away as soon as they reached him, and the dark closed in on him from all sides. He tried a verbal " *Lumos* !" without success, than a non-verbal one with the same discouraging result. He had been stripped of all his magic in this strange realm.

"Where am I?" he muttered, stretching out his hands. He could feel his wedding band on his finger; it increased his courage. He also realised that the chain Harry had given him was still around his neck. He moved around in a circle, waiting for his palms to encounter an obstacle or some wall of the sort; there was only emptiness. Severus determinedly set one foot in front of the other, hands groping and outstretched. He suddenly admired muggles profoundly for being able to manage without magic.

"Severus!" the slightest of whispers caressed his ear.

"Harry?" Severus called out, and his voice was swallowed up by the dark. His shoes did not make any sound on the ground. The path sloped downwards all the time, making him descend little by little into unknown mysteries. He did not even know out of what material the floor consisted…A tiny pinprick of light came into view. Severus moved suspiciously towards it, instinctively cautious. His skills as a spy allowed him to move gracefully and silently; his robes did not even rustle. The light was a yellow flame, and just when Severus was heaving a sigh of relief – it went out. Severus frowned. He

continued walking, albeit with doubled caution. Was there someone or something which or who had deliberately put on and put off that light? Was he being lured into some lethal trap? His left hand collided with something cold and metallic. It was round, like a doorknob, and Severus realised that that was exactly what it was. He felt around the knob and managed to discern, by touch, the outlines of a wooden door. Severus turned the knob and pulled. The door opened without protest. Severus stepped inside the new corridor or whatever it was. At last there was light; but it was a sickly greyish-greenish colour seeping through the stone walls of the path. The ceiling was either non-existent or so high away that it beyond Severus's view. The trail of the Killing Curse, Severus thought to himself. Intuition besides his usual sharp logic warned him not to let the fog touch him. Merlin, where am I? Is this Legilimency? It should bring me clarification instead of confusion! He arrived at a junction: the path separated, splitting into two corridors. Severus paused, deliberating his next step.

"Sev!" That pet name, Harry's faint voice in his ears…It seemed to come from the left corridor. Severus walked forwards briskly. Here, too, there were wisps of greenish fog which hindered rather than illuminated his way. On and on he walked, longing desperately to see his husband. How much time have I still got? he thought with disquiet. Every now and then he would catch a trace of the greenish fog which seemed to be extending further and further. Once he looked back, and, far away behind him, saw the fog creeping up on him. If he wanted to return, then he could no longer do so. He arrived at a curving road. His eyes widened. Now he could see images. Their first bonding ceremony. Harry's face was stiff and pale, and Severus was digging his nails into the youth's hand as they walked around Dumbledore's office to accomplish the ceremony…Then the scene which haunted him most of all: Harry lying on Severus's bed, and Severus taking him, rocking back and forth quickly while Harry lay completely still…Severus gritted his teeth. This was a test. He had to get past the images. He walked briskly, passing pictures of his Death Eater past, of people being tortured, of Voldemort laughing… Severus touched his wedding ring with his other hand, drawing a

deep sigh. He had reached the end of the road; a metal door greeted him. He opened it without delay. He was welcomed by the voice of an old man:

"Close the door, Severus Snape, or the green fog will reach us sooner."

Severus obeyed, startled. The darkness of the room lifted as a soft glow of light filled it; now he could see the source of the voice. It was an ancient man, stooped, holding a staff in his hand. The eyes were dark and keen in the old face. Severus recognised that face from his extensive readings and sketches in books of magical history.

"Merlin!" he exclaimed softly.

"'Merlin', Severus, is but a title. No one knows my true name."

Something in the eyes of the legendary magician prevented Severus from asking what his true name was; and, thirsty as he was for knowledge, he had only one goal in mind.

"My husband is on his deathbed." He managed to keep his voice steady.

"I know, my boy, I know. Why don't you take a seat?"

A gnarled hand gestured at a comfortable sofa which had not been there before.

"I have no time to sit! Every second is of vital value!" Severus nearly snarled.

"You have found Harry."

The Merlin motioned him to follow him.

"What was the use of offering me a seat?" Severus growled, jumping up from the sofa. The Merlin's mouth quirked in his snowy beard. The man reminded Severus of Albus Dumbledore, except that the

Merlin didn't have any spectacles, which was rather surprising considering his age. The Merlin led Severus gracefully into an inner room. Harry was lying in an odd kind of glass coffin. He was dressed in the black robes which he had worn during the battle. He was not wearing his glasses. Severus remembered that they had fallen down when Harry had been blasted back by the Killing Curse. He had picked them up without noticing that he done so and put them in his pocket – but they were not with him in this world. He was surprised that his wedding ring and chain were there at all. Harry, too, was wearing his ring. Severus wanted touch him, hold him in his arms…

"I want to take him back," he said.

"You cannot take him-" the Merlin answered, but Severus rounded on him and interrupted him.

"He is my husband, he and I are bonded together by blood, by love, by-"

"You were bonded together by hate."

"That was in the past!" Severus said, searching for a way to raise the glass lid of the coffin. "Please, I have to take him back, he is dying, I saw the green mist of the curse spreading-"

"It will come even here, my boy, and destroy us all," the Merlin said with utter composure.

"I will not let it destroy Harry!"

"You did not let me finish my sentence, impetuous wizard. You cannot take your husband back unless..."

Severus wanted to hex the Merlin, but besides the fact that he could not use his magical powers, time was slipping away; he could not argue or negotiate with the Merlin; he had to submit himself to the rules established by this ancient sorcerer.

"…unless you answer a question of mine," the Merlin ended his sentence.

"Ask me," Severus said abruptly.

"Why do you want to take him back with you? If you tire of your husband, you may revert to treating him before you learnt to love him."

"I can never tire of Harry!"

"That is what most people say."

"I love him."

"That is also what most people say. If one can fall in love, my boy, then one can fall out of it."

"Do most people end up in an infernal dark labyrinth when they say that?" Severus asked acidly.

"No, they don't. They don't really have such a unique opportunity, do they?"

"And if they had such an opportunity, would they all seize it?" Severus spoke in a low whisper.

"I suppose not all of them would, but you would not be the only one," the Merlin said.

"But we are talking about Harry, not about others. I want to take him back with me because his time has not yet come. He is not yet dead. And now, let me ask you a question, Merlin, which will answer your question."

"Go ahead," the sorcerer said, raising a bushy eyebrow.

"You have asked me why I want to take Harry back with me. What does Harry want? Does he want to come with me? Or does he want

to go on? What does my husband wish? That is the most important thing I need to know."

The Merlin smiled and made a small wave with his hand. The glass lid disappeared, and Severus strode forwards and scooped Harry up in his arms.

The Merlin was still smiling.

"The mist closes in on us. Go, Severus Snape, leave swiftly if you want your husband to accompany you in this lifetime."

"Thank you," Severus answered sincerely, nearly in tears.

"At last some manners. Better late than never," the Merlin murmured, opening the metal door for him. Severus clutched Harry to him and stepped out. The fog was everywhere, and it was advancing, closing in on him. Severus turned around, but the door had vanished, leaving only an expanse of stone wall. He was trapped. I am stripped of my magic, I can't get out; I will fail and Harry will die, he thought. Dumbledore's words came back to him.

" *Severus and Harry, you embody the power Voldemort knows not."*

"Love," Severus murmured. He stood up.

"Take me, then!" he shouted at the fog. "Take me, but let Harry go! Let my husband go!"

The fog flickered and vanished.

Severus heaved a sigh of relief.

"That Merlin was a Gryffindor…noble self-sacrifice versus Slytherin self-preservation…Was that what it was?" he snorted contemptuously, his characteristic thorny temper rising; then he looked down at Harry, and his eyes softened.

"Of course…if I am practising Legilimency on a Gryffindor…"

He scooped up Harry in his arms and went back all the way he had come. It was tiring because the path climbed upwards all the time. He was completely exhausted, and he knew that the Merlin had released Harry in the nick of time. He was on what he hoped was the last stage of this insane journey, sweat trickling in his eyes – Harry's body was heavy in his arms – when the Merlin's voice spoke to him, seeming to come from everywhere:

"Remember, Severus Snape, that very often people only understand the magnitude of loss when they nearly lose, or actually lose, someone who is close to them. You are Harry Potter's Protector, as he is your Protector, and never forget that your love vanquished Lord Voldemort and enabled you to take your husband with you."

Harry moved in his arms, and Severus gasped, sinking down onto his knees, staring at Harry's face…

Chapter 45

CHAPTER 45

Severus's eyes opened with a start. The echoes of the Merlin's – or whoever he was – voice was still echoing in his ears. Harry's chest rose and fell in a deep breath. His eyelids fluttered, and his fingers flexed. Severus let out a sobbing gasp, and his fatigue was forgotten at the sight of his husband stirring. Harry opened his eyes slowly, the green as bright and startling as always. He blinked and rubbed them. His tongue came out and moistened his lips, and Severus knew that Harry needed water, and he rose on one elbow with the intention of grabbing a glass.

"Severus, off you go," Madam Pomfrey's voice said.

"I shall do nothing of the sort!"

"I have to check his heart and general condition, and I need to make sure that you, too, have not suffered any damage after such a long session of Legilimency," the matron said crossly.

"Severus," Dumbledore said gently. He was holding Severus's and Harry's wands in his hand, and he was beaming.

Severus glared at both of them. Muttering under his breath, he slowly got off the bed, where the matron checked him perfunctorily with her wand. She dismissed him with a nod and drew the curtains around Harry's bed, hiding Harry from view.

A sleepy voice said:

"Where is Severus? Is he all right?"

Madam Pomfrey said something to him in a soothing voice. Severus shifted his feet impatiently.

"Severus, my dear, boy, you took exactly fifty-five minutes."

Severus felt the tiredness wash over him, together with a deep sorrow for the devastation the war had brought upon all of them; but there was joy mixed with his emotions – joy that Harry had chosen to spend a lifetime with a short-tempered, gruff and difficult Potions Master. Madam Pomfrey poked her head out.

"He is in perfect health but very tired. I will perform a few tests on him tomorrow to be on the safe side. And now, both you and he are going to sleep."

"I am not going anywhere or sleeping without-" Severus was forced to leave his sentence unfinished when the curtains snapped closed again. He exhaled sharply and sat down on a chair. He buried his face in his hands.

"Would I have been able to get through my life without him?" he murmured. "There was a moment when I thought that I had lost him, Albus."

Dumbledore's hand squeezed Severus's shoulder fondly.

"Severus, my brave boy, what we all need is a good night's sleep."

"I don't suppose I am allowed to spend the night here?" Severus asked snappily.

"No indeed. You can see him next morning. Good night, Severus," Madam Pomfrey said, emerging from the curtains and hurrying away to attend to her other patients.

"Severus," Dumbledore said.

The Potions Master looked at him.

"I did not want to blame you when I was shouting at you," he said abruptly.

"I do not blame you for blaming me, Severus," Dumbledore said, drawing the thin wizard to him in a fatherly one-armed embrace, "Harry is your love."

"Yes," Severus whispered. Albus handed him back his wand along with Harry's.

Severus was utterly worn out when he went to bed; yet he managed to grumble at the fact that the space next to him was empty before turning off the light. He did not sleep through; he woke up to the sound of his bedroom door creaking open. He was always forgetting to apply some Crikey Anti-Creak Oil to the hinges. Socked feet padded felinely across the hard floor to his bed with a certainty which indicated perfect familiarity with the room even in the dark. Severus's heart soared; he raised the covers, and the mattress dipped a little as a slight body moved next to him.

"Harry!" his voice was choked.

"Sev," the answer came back in those beloved tones, and he could hear the simultaneous smile and tears in them, "I could only make it here after curfew."

A warm hand searched and found his.

"And what will Madam Pomfrey say?"

"I left a note on the pillow explaining my absence. I'll have to go down tomorrow, though; she told me before I went to sleep that she wants to perform a couple of tests to check my neural responses and reflexes just to be on the safe side."

" *Lumos* !" Severus uttered.

He gazed into the bright green eyes in the soft glow of the light. They were glistening with tears, as were his. Severus took him into his arms, crushing him against his body.

When he drew back, Harry gently wiped the gaunt cheeks with his palm.

"I love you," Severus said in barely audible voice.

"And I love you," Harry responded, wrapping his arms around his husband's neck. They held each other for a long time, crying softly. Severus hooked his leg protectively over Harry's hip as they lay on their sides, face to face. They gradually fell asleep. They were woken up by a Howler from Madam Pomfrey, who scolded Harry thoroughly for being disobedient and sneaking out of the hospital wing; she expected him to be in the hospital wing in twenty minutes. Harry laughed, but Severus looked serious.

"I should have sent you back. What if something had happened to you while you were sleeping in our bed?"

"Sev, I'm fine."

"We'll see what Madam Pomfrey says," his husband said austerely, handing him a breakfast plate bursting with food cooked by faithful Dobby.

"For how long was I out?" Harry asked.

"Out? You thought that you were unconscious?" Severus asked incredulously.

"Wasn't I?"

Madam Pomfrey had obviously not told Harry as yet about all that had happened. She had, however, told him that Voldemort was gone for good.

"Is Voldemort really gone?" Harry followed up his next question, eating hungrily.

"He is," Severus said.

"And the Order members, are they fine? My friends?"

"I'll tell you everything after breakfast and your check-up," Severus said in a quelling tone.

A stubborn expression spread over Harry's face, and he lowered his cutlery.

"Are my friends and the Order fine, Severus?" he repeated firmly. Severus caved in. Harry only used his full name when he was very serious about something – or about to get angry.

"Alastor Moody died, and there are other Aurors who did not survive. Everyone is fine otherwise."

Harry looked very unhappy. Severus reached out and touched his hand.

"Harry-"

"Yes. I know what you're about to say, and you're right. That's what always happens in wars," Harry said softly. He gazed into his husband's eyes. "I'm so glad you're here with me, Sev."

Severus's eyes prickled as he thought of how he himself had nearly lost Harry to Voldemort. He pressed Harry's hand, and the smaller fingers curled around his tightly.

Madam Pomfrey greeted Harry with a stern look and another scolding; but when she saw that Severus had accompanied him to the hospital wing, she smiled and even chuckled, shaking her head.

"Being with your husband is definitely one of the best ways to promote healing, but you should have been more patient," she said. A few minutes later, she released Harry with the word "Splendid!" and told him to walk around the lake for some fresh air. She knew that Severus would give him a full account of all the harrowing events. The two wizards sat down at the foot of a tree near the lake.

It was a warm day and still early in the morning. Severus sighed as he gazed at the lake.

"I thought that I would go through the remainder of my life without you. That infernal Merlin…" he murmured, running his hand through his husband's messy tousled hair.

Harry looked confused.

"Merlin?"

Severus nodded.

"The Merlin. Merlin is a title, not a name…No one knows his true name…But I am starting in the middle of things…Harry, what do you remember before you…lost consciousness?"

"I remember Voldemort aiming the Killing Curse at you…" Harry said slowly.

"But you, with your heroic Gryffindor attitude, leapt in the way. He caught you. In the chest. Your heart stopped," Severus said, stifling a fresh onslaught of tears.

Harry stared at him.

"I was dead?"

"For about a hundred seconds. Then your heart started beating again…look at your chest, Harry."

Harry unbuttoned the light shirt he was wearing; the scar, which was reddened and sore, had been covered with a piece of gauze; no charm or potion could soothe the scar of a deadly curse; it had to heal on its own. Harry had not touched the gauze while dressing, thinking that what lay underneath was simply a wound or cut. Severus carefully removed the gauze, and they both studied the mark. Harry took Severus's hands in his.

"I wear you in my skin now, my falcon," he said with a smile, "it underlines the fact that you're my Protector."

"And you are my Protector. You saved my life," Severus whispered.

Harry gently pushed back Severus's left sleeve, tracing the faded Dark Mark with his forefinger.

"Do you know how brave you are, Sev?"

Severus couldn't speak. He merely bowed his head for a few moments. Then he gently covered Harry's scar again, kissed him on the collarbone and buttoned up the shirt again. Then he told Harry all about Legilimency connection via their wands, his strange surreal experience while he searched for Harry's soul, about the green fog and the Merlin.

"You were resisting the curse as much as you could even while it sapped your strength, you were refusing to go on…"

"Go on where?"

Severus smiled.

"Into the light, as they call it, into a new life," he said. "The place which ghosts such as the Bloody Baron or Nearly Headless Nick avoid because they cling too much to the past."

"But why can't other people bring back those who are wandering on the brink of death but still alive?"

Severus reflected for a few moments before answering:

"Voldemort tried to kill you; the curse rebounded on him and killed him as well. He was arrogant enough to think that your blood would make him stronger – even invincible when he was preparing for his rebirth ritual. In his folly, he completely forgot that the innocence of your blood would be his downfall. Added to the blood bond you and I share, it was too much for him. And, Harry, the circumstances

allowed me to bring you back. If I hadn't been able to combine Legilimency, wand-magic and the blood bond, then I would have lost you, my love; and it was Albus who bonded our wands together. There are only a handful of people who can do that. It was a very incredible and very lucky chance, Harry, which most people would not have had in our situation and without the right abilities and circumstances."

"The right combination," Harry said, plucking some grass and sifting it through his hands.

"Yes. It is the simple things which often give us the most power, my love…"

The sparkle returned to Harry's green eyes.

"I like it when you call me 'my love', Sev."

He put his arms around Severus's waist and lay down in the grass with him.

"You saved my life. Yet again," Harry murmured, "my Protector..."

"And you saved mine, my love," Severus replied. They were silent for a few moments, enjoying each other's company.

"You do know that the media is going to storm you with questions?" Severus reminded him.

Harry groaned.

"Yeah…And they're going to storm you with questions as well, sweetheart."

"Sweetheart?" Severus raised his eyebrows.

"How about 'Unicorn'?"

"That only reminds me of a questionable shop in Knockturn Alley," Severus said.

"Why?"

"It's called 'Uniporn'," Severus said. Harry began to laugh. And I was so close to never ever hearing his laugh again, Severus thought with a shiver.

"Did you ever go in there?"

"Once, when I was in my mid-twenties. Lucius Malfoy wanted me to accompany him in there. I still don't know what is so attractive about dragon phalli."

Harry grinned and wondered if Charlie Weasley knew about the place…Then he thought about Draco Malfoy.

"What has happened to Draco?" he asked.

"He is in St. Mungo's. Death Eater camps are still being located and shut down. He will live, but he is heavily traumatised, and his parents are in Azkaban."

They continued talking about the aftermath of the war in soft voices, lying together in the grass.

Dumbledore and McGonagall, who were walking about in the grounds, strolled back to the castle, the former holding a copy of *The Daily Prophet* in his hands. The whole issue was devoted to the downfall of Voldemort. The two teachers were discussing what the media didn't know as yet.

"So Severus brought Harry back," McGonagall said.

"They brought each other back. A devoted couple," Dumbledore murmured.

"It's one for the fairytales," McGonagall commented dryly. "Two people who hate each other gradually experience such a strong love that it goes beyond doom."

"Love works in mysterious ways, Minerva."

"Definitely," the strict Head of Gryffindor said, and an odd blush suffused her cheeks for a few moments.

"I think, Minerva, that what everyone needs is some time to mourn those who fell in the war, time to celebrate, and especially a breath of fresh air. Which is why I am of the opinion that it is unhealthy for Severus to remain cooped up in the dungeons all the time, especially with a young vivacious man to share them with him."

"Are you thinking of...?" McGonagall trailed away as Dumbledore began to nod before she had finished her question.

"It's Hagrid's idea. I think it's brilliant."

Chapter 46

CHAPTER 46

"Where are we going?" Harry asked curiously. Severus, too, was looking suspicious as he walked next to his husband. Dumbledore had asked them to meet at the entrance of the castle; the couple had been greeted warmly by the Headmaster and a beaming Hagrid. Harry had met all his friends again the day before– much hugging, kissing and tears of both sorrow and joy had ensued. People had praised him, making Harry feel rather uncomfortable. The young wizard pointed out that he would never have managed without the help of the Order, his family – and his husband. Severus had been standing quietly in a corner while everybody had surged towards Harry to embrace him. When Harry embraced and kissed him in front of everyone, he flushed a little and pressed Harry close to him; and now, following Dumbledore and Hagrid, they were holding hands and exchanging curious glances. Recognition sparked in their eyes as they were led into the Forbidden Forest and down a familiar pebbly path.

"But I thought this area had been restored to its original state?" Severus voiced Harry's thoughts as the honeymoon cottage, as they called it, rose before their eyes. It looked a little bigger than before. The wind chimes were still hanging from the porch. Dumbledore cleared his throat.

"When it was time to clear the area after your stay, Hagrid suggested otherwise. He felt confident that you would return and the house would not wait in vain for you. Harry and Severus, would you like this house to be your home? It is in an area which the residents of the Forest don't mind giving up at all – especially not to you two, and it is at the very edge of the Forest – close to the castle. If you wish to live in this area, then a Floo portal will be included and the place shall be permanently registered with the Ministry. If not, then maybe you can use it as seasonal quarters or a temporary home."

Severus stared at it, drinking in the sight. Harry seemed to be lost in a dream. It was a small simple place, the opposite of Malfoy Manor or Grimmauld Place. Its homeliness reminded Harry of The Burrow, and the memories of his honeymoon came flooding back to him in vivid pictures. Grimmauld Place was a sinister house – too many unpleasant things had happened in there, and it only reminded him of Sirius's death. He had been making vague plans to renovate it once he started earning his own money, but using it as a home of his own had made him shudder.

Severus turned and looked into Dumbledore's blue eyes. Harry turned as well.

Severus's throat was too constricted for words. He merely nodded, and Harry whispered:

"Yes! We would love this to be our home..."

"You have always been like a father to me, Albus," Severus said softly.

"And you two are like sons," Albus said, eyes twinkling. He put his arms around their shoulders, and the three wizards embraced. Harry ran up to Hagrid as well.

"It's a marvellous idea, Hagrid!" he said, half crying, half laughing as the giant crushed him in a hug. Severus shook his hand warmly.

"Ye've made Harry happier than he's ever been," Hagrid told the Potions Master.

"I'm the happy one," Severus said. Even a few months ago, a comment like "What a touching image of domestic bliss" would have usually been Severus's first utterance at the sight of the house; but sarcasm was the furthest thing away from his mind as he looked at the new residence he would be sharing with Harry.

"Dobby and his wife-to-be Winky have insisted on looking after you and the house," Dumbledore added.

"Wife? Winky? How come Dobby didn't tell me?" Harry said, eyes sparkling.

"He wanted to surprise you," Dumbledore said.

The two house-elves had become as inseparable as Severus and Harry, although Dobby refused to pay attention whenever Winky talked about Dobby's dress sense. And so it was that Harry and Severus attended their very first elf-wedding. Elves never married indoors; they were creatures who maintained and nourished a strong bond with nature; the treetops made beautiful green arches and ceilings, and the summer grass provided a lush green carpet for their feet. Elves possessed their own kind of magic, and it became clear to Harry why they had been treated with such cruelty during Voldemort's reign. They had their own powers, and their close link with nature provided them with secrets and mysteries which wizards didn't and couldn't know about. Jealously and fury towards these little creatures who followed their own rules had led to a regime of utter repression; elves had been shipped off to camps which were just as bad as the Death Eater camps; and even centuries before Voldemort's time, wizarding folk had been envious of elf-powers which they could not access. Who else, after all, could manage to Apparate and Disapparate within the powerful walls and enchantments of Hogwarts?

After the beautiful and magic-infused elf-wedding, Severus and Harry started moving their belongings to the cottage. Dobby and Winky had their own spacious quarters back at Hogwarts – Harry's and Severus's wedding-gift to the overjoyed couple.

The cottage had been magically enlarged to adapt to Severus's and Harry's needs – a huge library and laboratory occupied the ground floor. The first thing Severus did was to transfer Harry's sketches from the dungeons to their new cottage and stick them to the walls; and Harry reverently placed the flasks containing their bonding blood

in a special little box. The box resided in the bedroom, sitting enthroned on a little shelf of its own.

Harry inaugurated their first night within the walls of their new home by performing a striptease for Severus.

Harry was taking a shower and singing loudly.

"Whoo-hoo!" Harry was going. Severus's mouth quirked, and his eyebrows shot up when Harry ended his song with an explosive "Yeah, oh yeah!"

"What in Azkaban is that song called?" Severus wanted to know when Harry sauntered out.

"It's some disco song I heard on the radio. I really like the 'whoo-hoo' part."

"I gathered as much, though it sounded like a constipated werewolf."

"I can check with Remus," Harry grinned, "but it has also got a good rhythm…"

He started swaying his hips languidly from side to side; he raised his arms and ran his hands through his hair. Severus's eyes glinted. Harry noticed the sign of beginning desire. He made a few more dancing moves and slowly pulled his t-shirt over his head.

"Mr Potter, are these supposed to be seduction tactics?" Severus asked.

"Naturally," Harry said nonchalantly, flinging his t-shirt at Severus, who caught it and inhaled its scent. Harry moved panther-like towards his husband and straddled his lap. Severus leant in for a kiss, but Harry laughed and avoided it.

"Harry Potter," Severus said warningly as the young wizard rocked back and forth on his lap before standing up and undoing his jeans, all the while teasing his husband by dancing just out of his reach.

"How about helping me out of my pants?" Harry suggested. Severus rose in a flash and draped his arm around Harry's upper body from behind. Harry stretched his body and leant into Severus, who caressed his bare chest and stomach with skilled hands. They moved down to Harry's jeans and slid them over his hips, his tall frame bowing as he peeled them all the way down to Harry's bare feet.

"Thank you," Harry said, kicking them off. He leant backwards even more so that his face was underneath Severus's. He parted his lips, as if waiting to be kissed. Severus bent to taste the warm mouth; but Harry snapped upright again. He twisted gracefully in Severus's arms and undressed him speedily, kissing him all the while. Severus bent his head, and his lips brushed the falcon scar on his chest.

"It's the most remarkable phenomenon I have come across in all my years as a practising wizard," he remarked.

"There's nothing remarkable about it at all. It's love," Harry said, smiling as Severus traced the wings of the falcon with his mouth and lazily moved on to a hardened nipple. Harry started to pant with pleasure. When they were both naked, Harry placed his palm upon Severus's chest and pushed him towards the bed. Severus stepped back and lay down. Harry slid on top of him and summoned a condom. Severus's dark eyes blazed in anticipation, and he pulled Harry's head down for another exchange of heated kisses. Even in his most passionate moments, Harry was caring, making sure that the tourmaline pendant didn't hit Severus in the face or that he did not kiss Severus too impulsively – it had once resulted in their teeth clashing and Severus cutting his lower lip. Harry loved to see Severus lose control. It was especially delightful when he slowed down the rhythm of his movements, or even stopped altogether just before the moment of completion, making Severus nearly insane with desire. He could be sure that Severus would "punish" him the same way next time.

When it was over, they looked into each other's eyes, breathing hard, Harry lying on top of Severus, who locked him in a fierce

embrace.

"Please never ever leave me!" he whispered, and Harry knew that he was crying.

"I won't," he said through his own tears, pressing his face into the hollow of Severus's neck – something he always did after their lovemaking. They lay like that together for a little, comforting each other with soft words and caresses. It was the first time they had made love since Voldemort had been defeated. Madam Pomfrey had been insistent on that both of them refrain from "strenuous activities", and Severus had sternly pointed out that marital activities of an exhausting nature had to be postponed, much to Harry's chagrin - and to his own.

Harry rolled off Severus and lay on his side; Severus turned to look at him. Harry wiped Severus's tears away with his hand. Outside, the wind chimes tinkled softly, soothingly.

"We'll be colleagues next term," Harry said, smiling. He had been offered the DADA job and he had accepted enthusiastically.

"Don't remind me," Severus said sarcastically.

"I'll finally get to know the inside of the staff room," Harry said dreamily.

"How exciting," his husband said in a bored tone, but the sparkle in his eyes revealed that he was rather pleased at the prospect of having Harry close to him every day, and Harry knew it. He grinned.

When the couple had settled down properly, Harry insisted on a house-warming party. Severus reluctantly agreed to "socialise", as he put it. And so, in the middle of August, the Hogwarts staff, several Order members and friends were invited; one half arrived via Floo and the other half scuttled merrily across the Hogwarts grounds to the cottage, including Fang. Lupin was excited and happy –

Shacklebolt had employed him at the Ministry, and he was looking forward to being a father in about eight months.

"Anyone's guess how they celebrated You-Know-Who's demise," Ron said. Hermione ignored her fiancé pointedly. Dumbledore was smiling benignly as he surveyed the whole scene behind his half-moon spectacles. He could not help feeling just a bit smug as he watched Harry steal a passionate kiss from Severus. The older wizard looked a little disgruntled at Harry's course of action; Dumbledore knew how reticent he was when it came to showing emotions in public; but there was a slight flush accentuating his arrogant cheekbones and a sparkle in his eyes which belied his reaction. Severus Snape was a very happy man.

"All's well that ends well," Dumbledore murmured to himself with a chuckle as he sipped his Firewhiskey and searched around in his robes for a lemon drop.

FIN

A/N: °howls° I can't believe it's over! What a long and wonderful trip it was – especially thanks to you and your reviews and PMs! I can't thank you enough – I can only point out again that my Snarry blog is not only dedicated to our favourite Snarry couple but also to you. I don't think the blog or the story would have been born without you, and the former has been thriving because of your visits, comments and participation, especially in the polls I opened. I will be writing a fourth Snarry story - I'm searching for a plot. Thanks again for reading this story!

Hugs,

Steppi

Epilogue

EPILOGUE

Dear all, here's a little follow-up to the last chapter of *Union of Doom,* since none of my previous Snarry stories have got epilogues. It is also intended as a big big big thank you for reading my Snarry stories and submitting so many comments and suggestions!

He looks like a child when he sleeps. His lips are parted. The sheets are bunched around his stomach, revealing his bare chest with its falcon-shaped scar. Severus is leaning over him, supporting his weight on his elbow as he gazes at his husband. He is waiting. But Severus Snape is not a patient man. However, he is subtle, and he therefore shows his yearning in a subtle way. He places his palm on Harry's chest, on that scar of love, his tapering fingers brushing a rosebud-nipple. He stoops and kisses the other scar, the one on Harry's forehead, obscured by the tousled fringe of jetty hair. Severus is waiting for the moment when Harry will open those beautiful green eyes. Harry stirs. Severus still finds it hard to believe that he is so happily married and devoted to the person he used to loathe. He has seen marriages fall apart. His own parents could not stand each other. He had vowed never to marry...Harry opens his eyes, and Severus knows what Harry is going to do. The young wizard puts his arms around Severus's neck and rubs his cheek against Severus's, and Severus can feel him stretching his body and chasing the sleep from his limbs.

"G'morning, Sev," he yawns.

It is raining outside. Severus reveres the rain. He likes to take walks outside in the rain and let himself get soaking wet. Harry has discovered the charms of the rain thanks to him. He used to tell Severus that he would get a cold, not caring about magical remedies working faster than Muggle ones. Then he realised that cloth and

hair clinging sensually to wet skin can be most entertaining indeed. Severus smiles as Harry scrambles out of bed and heads towards the bathroom, humming. Severus rolls over to where Harry was lying and snuggles into the warm patch of his husband's body heat. If he happens to get up before Harry, then he will often find Harry doing the same, sunning himself on Severus's side of the bed, sometimes with his face buried in the pillow, breathing in the scent of Severus's hair. Severus presses his hooked nose into Harry's pillow for a few moments; then he slowly sits up in bed.

Later, he is teaching Potions. Harry is teaching Defense Against The Dark Arts at the same time. They do not get to see each other very often during the day even though they are in the same castle; the castle is huge, however, and their teaching tasks are demanding. Severus is as strict as ever with the students, but he is no longer embittered and resentful. On the contrary: Severus Snape is what he had thought he would never be: happy. He is happiest in the evenings when he returns home, either together with Harry, or to find Harry waiting for him, or to wait for Harry himself. Of course they bicker and argue from time to time. They are both rather stubborn. Severus sometimes feels like shaking his husband until he sees his point of view. And when Harry teases him, Severus aims a few harmless but chastising hexes at him. Then they will indulge in an affectionate mock-duel, mostly ending in kisses…and more.

They decide to eat dinner together at home. Severus is already back. His lips curve into a smile when a silvery falcon flies to him and circles him in greeting. He is not aware that he is smiling. It just happens during moments like these. The door opens, and there is a pause as Harry hangs up his cloak and changes his shoes.

"Sev?" he calls out. Severus is ready with his wand, leaning against the kitchen counter. His panther-Patronus floats out to meet his husband, who soon walks into the kitchen, smiling.

"Ah, the pleasures of domestic life," Severus murmurs to him teasingly.

"What! Are you already tired of me?" Harry asks, his eyes twinkling like Dumbledore's.

"How can I ever get bored or tired with you keeping me on my toes and on my fingertips?" Severus replies, drawing Harry into his arms.

Living together in their own house was something both of them had to get used to. Sharing a home and a bed and a life and much more. Severus had been worried that his reclusive habits would cause tension and disagreements – like during the early stages of their marriage; but when he settled down in his new home with Harry, he discovered that it was hard to remain a hermit. Harry's laughter and vivaciousness made him shake off some of his solitary habits. At the same time, Harry knew when Severus wanted to be alone. Severus simply had to retire to the Potions laboratory, and Harry understood. After all, he, Harry, also had his moments when he wanted to be alone. Both hated being alone without each other for a longer amount of time. When Harry had to visit Germany for a week to attend a DADA conference, Severus had slept badly – or not at all – during those lonely nights, Harry's pillow in his arms. He never told Harry about the pillow, though.

Severus has a growing collection of Harry's sketches, including some which he has clandestinely salvaged from wastepaper bins.

"Hungry?" he asks Harry, who nods and kisses him.

They eat together and talk about various things: teaching, their students, the wizarding world's slow but steady recovery from the effects of Voldemort's despotism. Severus and Harry both bear scars as reminders – Harry two, on his forehead and chest, and Severus the brand on his left forearm. Scars which bind them, together with blood and love. Severus often opens the little box in their bedroom to look at the twin flasks filled with their bonding blood.

After supper, they prepare material for their respective classes and correct assignments in the library. From time to time, Severus catches Harry's eye, and the young wizard grins roguishly at him. Severus frowns at first. Harry continues grinning and returns to grading an essay. He puts the essay aside and stares at Severus again. Severus raises an eyebrow, and Harry moistens his lips, recognising the gesture as a favourable signal. He rises and walks over to his husband. He sits down on Severus's lap. Severus's eyes glitter, and he reaches into his pocket. He extracts a condom and strokes Harry's cheek with it. They are soon making love, Severus's chair squeaking as Harry rocks back and forth on his lap. Severus clutches at the slight hips, moaning at the sensation of being inside Harry but having to leave the control of their rhythm to Harry. They are sweaty and breathless afterwards. They indulge in one of their quirks and finish grading their essays sitting next to each other – naked. If only the students knew, Severus thinks, and he is sure that Harry is thinking the same thing. They shower together, Severus chasing the soap suds across Harry's stomach with his fingers while Harry laughs and stands on tiptoe to cover every inch of Severus's head with shampoo.

They slip into their bed, and Severus reads while Harry sketches a picture of Severus reading.

"Am I that fascinating?" Severus drawls.

The wizarding clock chimes twelve times. Black eyes and green eyes meet.

"What a question," Harry smiles, "especially when you know the answer. You'll always be fascinating. Happy anniversary, Sev."

"Happy anniversary, Harry," Severus says, embracing his husband of two years warmly.